

Epicurean Philosophy In Relation To Gulags and the Rack

Post by "Cassius" of April 27, 2025 at 7:33 PM

in relation to this topic we also have what Diogenes Laertius recorded about Epicurus' view of the wise man on the rack. i note that Yonge disagrees with Bailey and Hicks as to whether the wise man will cry out in pain (Yonge says that he will not; the other two say he will) but that all agree that the wise man is considered to be happy even while on the rack / under torture.

Quote

Laërtius, c. 222-235 κὰν στρεβλωθῆ δ' ὁ σοφός, εἶναι αὐτὸν εὐδαίμονα. μόνον τε χάριν ἔξειν τὸν σοφόν, καὶ ἐπὶ φίλοις καὶ παροῦσι καὶ ἀποῦσιν ὁμοίως διατε εὐλογοῦντα. ὅτε μέντοι στρεβλοῦται, ἔνθα καὶ μύζει καὶ οἰμῶζει. γυναικί τ' οὐ μιγήσεσθαι τὸν σοφὸν ἢ οἱ νόμοι ἀπαγορεύουσιν, ὡς φησι Διογένης ἐν τῇ Ἐπιτομῇ τῶν Ἐπικούρου ἠθικῶν δογμάτων. ...

Yonge, 1853 That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally whether they are present or absent. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture.

Hicks, 1925 Even on the rack the wise man is happy. He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed. When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans.

Bailey, 1926 And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy. Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament.

I cite this because - not trying to flippanant but to make a point -- i am not aware that anyone has good evidence that Epicurus had first-hand experience of being on the rack. We know that he was in extreme pain from kidney disease at the end of his life, but that's not the same as being under intentional torture, and yet Epicurus (or later Epicureans) none of whom we know to have been speaking from personal experience, took a strong position on the point.

I would cite this as additional evidence that Epicurus was motivated to speak "philosophically" about "absence of pain." My point in the first post was that the perfect is not the enemy of the good, and that the presence of some amount of pain, even a large amount, does not prevent an Epicurean from pronouncing himself "happy."

Epicurus would never have suggested that we regularly choose pain if a literal state of "total absence of pain" was required to be happy. Epicurus wasn't totally without pain on his last day, and a person on the rack is also not without pain, so there's something about the definition of the term "happy" from an Epicurean viewpoint that allows it to coexist with pain. And a "reduction to the absurd" interpretation of "absence of pain" therefore clearly cannot be what Epicurus was holding up as the practical goal of life from an Epicurean perspective.

Just like happiness can coexist with pain, the goal of life has to take into account that some degree of pain will be present, even chosen, unless we have literally advanced to the state of being totally in control of our circumstances, which no one we know of has yet achieved.

So to close again on my ultimate point, it appears to me that what Epicurus is doing is laying out an extremely practical goal that is also logically consistent. In a universe with no supernatural god and no absolute right and wrong there can be no single course of life that is "best" for everyone. Instead, the general way to state the goal is to take Nature's guidance - physical and mental pleasure and pain - and then do the best we can to make sure that our pleasures outweigh our pains as much as possible. Everyone is different, and for some of us that is indeed going to mean a life of predominantly physical pleasures.

But may of us think more deeply about how we only live for a short time and forever after cease to exist. Those people are going to remember (per Torquatus) that Epicurus held that mental experiences are often longer-lasting and more intense than physical ones. Those people are then going to make a personal assessment of what mental and physical activities bring them the most pleasure, and they will make their choices accordingly. And they will do everything they can to pursue that goal as vigorously as possible, regardless of what anyone tells them that "the gods" want or what "virtue" calls them to do.