

Is All Desire Painful? How Would Epicurus Answer?

Post by “Joshua” of May 8, 2025 at 8:59 PM

Quote

Is there any external thing or circumstance (that is not itself defined as always painful) which at some time does not lose its character as generally painful and become pleasurable?

Does the meaning of this question change if you remove the word external?

This is a tangent, but consider the following Principle Doctrine:

Quote

[PD35](#). It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if, at present, he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape.

Why does Epicurus think this is a problem for "the one who acts"? Cicero in *On Ends* suggests that this is not an effective deterrent; would Epicurus agree with him?

On Ends, Book II:

Quote

For those things which you were saying were very weak and powerless arguments,—when you urged that the wicked were tormented by their own consciences, and also by fear of punishment, which is either inflicted on them, or keeps them in constant fear that it will be inflicted. One ought not to imagine a man timid, or weak in his mind, nor a good man, who, whatever he has done, keeps tormenting himself, and dreads everything; but rather let us fancy one, who with great shrewdness refers everything to usefulness—an acute, crafty, wary man, able with ease to devise plans for deceiving any one secretly, without any witness, or any one being privy to it. Do you think that I am speaking of Lucius Tubulus?—who, when as praetor he had been sitting as judge upon the [pg 149]trial of some assassins, took money to influence his decision so undisguisedly, that the next year Publius Scævola, being tribune of the people, made a motion before the people, that an inquiry should be made into the case. In accordance with which decree of the people, Cnæus Cæpio, the consul, was

ordered by the senate to investigate the affair. Tubulus immediately went into banishment, and did not dare to make any reply to the charge, for the matter was notorious.

XVII. We are not, therefore, inquiring about a man who is merely wicked, but about one who mingles cunning with his wickedness, (as Quintus Pompeius³² did when he repudiated the treaty of Numantia,) and yet who is not afraid of everything, but who has rather no regard for the stings of conscience, which it costs him no trouble at all to stifle; for a man who is called close and secret is so far from informing against himself, that he will even pretend to grieve at what is done wrong by another; for what else is the meaning of the word crafty (*versutus*)? I recollect on one occasion being present at a consultation held by Publius Sextilius Rufus, when he reported the case on which he asked advice to his friends in this manner: That he had been left heir to Quintus Fadius Gallus; in whose will it had been written that he had entreated Sextilius to take care that what he left behind him should come to his daughter. Sextilius denied that he had done so. He could deny it with impunity, for who was there to convict him? None of us believed him; and it was more likely that he should tell a lie whose interest it was to do so, than he who had set down in his will that he had made the request which he ought to have made. He added, moreover, that having sworn to comply with the Voconian³³ law, he did [pg 150]not dare to violate it, unless his friends were of a contrary opinion. I myself was very young when I was present on this occasion, but there were present also many men of the highest character, not one of whom thought that more ought to be given to Fadia than could come to her under the provisions of the Voconian law. Sextilius retained a very large inheritance; of which, if he had followed the opinion of those men who preferred what was right and honourable to all profit and advantage, he would never have touched a single penny. Do you think that he was afterwards anxious and uneasy in his mind on that account? Not a bit of it: on the contrary, he was a rich man, owing to that inheritance, and he rejoiced in his riches, for he set a great value on money which was acquired not only without violating the laws, but even by the law.

As I said, this is a tangent. But it might be instructive.