

Confusion: "The feelings are only two"

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2025 at 4:44 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

This here almost feels like an endorsement for the "ascetic absence of pain" argument. "To be in no pain" seems to be used here literally, rather than to mean "100% pleasure 0% pain". And, if I understand correctly, this state is put above "joyous activity of pleasure". How do you interpret this? Though perhaps it's meant to be read as "since there are only two feelings, if the hand is not in pain, then it is in pleasure, and therefore feels no need for pleasure".

Yes I think your last sentence is the explanation. There's a lot to process in the whole passage, among which is the fact that we don't think of a hand or any other part of the body as having its own separate will or thought process to think that it "lacks" anything. So there's some underlying premise here that's not being stated as to why the whole question should be interpreted as making sense. I presume that Chrysippus is reasoning something along the lines of "You Epicurus say that pleasure is the guide of ALL living things, so it ought not make any difference whether the living thing has a brain or not, so let's pick a "hand."

When you put it together with much else that Cicero says, the general point seems to be that Chrysippus is taking the orthodox position that pleasure means "stimulation." If pleasure means stimulation, and Epicurus is going to assert that all things are guided toward pleasure, then a hand should feel the lack of pleasure when it is not stimulated, and the hand should want stimulation. The fact that the hand doesn't seem to want stimulation is to Chrysippus proof that the hand does not identify pleasure as the good. And if the hand doesn't, Epicurus, then why should we presume that pleasure is nature's goal for living things -- your theory is blown to bits.

And that's why Torquatus' father told him that the argument was laughable, as it is effective against people like the Cyreniacs who identify pleasure with stimulation, but it doesn't touch Epicurus, since Epicurus' definition of pleasure is more than just stimulation, and includes healthy normal functioning. And since there is no reason to believe that Chrysippus' hand was not functioning normally at the time of the questioning, in the Epicurean view Chrysippus' hand is experiencing pleasure (because normal healthy condition is considered to be pleasure, even though that condition isn't stimulation).

For me the trickier part is where Torquatus goes further, as he does several times, and state that the absence of pain (which I think is fairly interpreted as in [PD03](#)) means not only pleasure, but the height of pleasure. To me, the various examples can reasonably be interpreted only one way (especially when Torquatus says "nothing could be more true"). What is being referred to is

the logical / mathematical point (which you cited already) that when there are only two possibilities, the absence of one IS the presence of the other - which is compelled by definition to the extent words have any necessity in them at all.

This is where I think Cicero intentionally leaves the the Epicurean argument incomplete, because he should have allowed Torquatus to spell that out explicitly. Instead, he leaves the implication clear but dangling. And in the case of the question regarding the comparison of the pleasure of the host who is pouring wine to the guest who is drinking wine, Cicero doesn't allow explanation by Torquatus at all -- we are just left to draw the logical conclusion that anyone who is "without pain" is at the height of pleasure - in pure pleasure - by definition.

Remember that the "height of pleasure" or "the limit of pleasure" need not be interpreted to mean "most intense" or "longest duration" or "all parts of the body." All "the limit of pleasure" really requires is that what is being measured is 100% pleasure and 0% pain. And if you say that your hand, or yourself, or anything else is "without pain" -- then if we are saying what we mean and mean what we say - then we are saying that we are at the "height of pleasure." People can balk and bark back that "that's not what I mean when I say height of pleasure!" But if they've been paying attention, Epicurus has shown them over and over that they need to think about how they are using words like "gods" and "virtue" and "pleasure" --- and "height of pleasure" is just another example of the same kind of re-statement of what a word really means.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I'm also unsure about how this passage relates to the topic at hand (no pun intended), in terms of attitude and mindset. Or was it meant as a more general callback to the initial topic of the thread?

I was mainly referring back to the general topic of the thread, but now that you mention it there is definitely a "mindset" issue here too -- seeing "height of pleasure" and "pleasure" in more accurate terms is a matter of adjusting your mind. That's the reason I entitled one of my recent articles a "Paradigm Shift"

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Speaking of which - a vaguely related thought I want to bring up. There are times when I find myself doubting whether Epicurean philosophy can truly work for me — not because I disagree with its core ideas, but because I live with a persistent undercurrent of physical discomfort. I start to wonder if Epicureanism assumes a baseline of health that I just don't have.

I would say that whether something "works" is defined by whether it is consistent with reality. The unreal and madeup can never "work" for any length of time. The Epicurean viewpoint is the

one that is consistent with reality, so I'd say that it's the only one that could every "work" for anyone, no matter how much baseline of pain you start with. Epicurean philosophy is going to call you to do everything you can to change the situation, and even when it can't be changed, it isn't going to try to lull you into complacency with a noble lie

[Quote from Rolf](#)

In those moments, other perspectives become tempting. The “surrender to the flow” of Taoism, or the radical acceptance of Stoicism, can seem like a way to bypass the whole problem of pain — to dissolve it in detachment. And yet, they ultimately drift from reality by denying that pleasure and pain matter.

Yes that is the problem. And sure someone can go ahead and commit suicide, counting on their religion to take them to a better place. I don't see counting on fables as a workable solution - I see that as the ultimate in terrible trades and guaranteed to lead to unfortunate results. At least when you are dealing with the truth, even though the odds may be stacked against you, you aren't placing your hope in fictional rescues that will never come.