

Does The Wise Man Groan and Cry Out When On The Rack / Under Torture / In Extreme Pain?

Post by “Don” of June 17, 2025 at 10:15 PM

This is why I dislike "happiness" as a translation for ευδαιμονια (eudaimonia). It is a woefully inadequate word choice. The reason I can accept "The wise man will 'be happy' on the rack" is that it actually says "κὰν στρεβλωθῆ δ' ὁ σοφός, εἶναι αὐτὸν εὐδαίμονα" "Even if the wise one is under torture - stretched on the rack, he is experiencing eudaimonia."

It seems also important to realize that the Greek is not punctuated like the English. The Greek seems to include this whole section:

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.

That middle section about gratitude comes right between the "rack" parts. When on the rack, the wise one may still feel gratitude for their life and for their friends. It's not that they're "happy happy joy joy" on the rack. They can feel gratitude for their life and friends, they can feel satisfied that they've lived their life well. They won't give up their friends even on the rack, they will show their gratitude "by word and deed." Honestly, I don't know if I could do that. I doubt it. But I'm not wise yet. I still have work to do in putting Epicurean principles deep into my bones. Do I still have tingly feelings of an afterlife sometimes in the dark of night? Maybe. Old habits are HARD to break. Do I feel gratitude for my life and my friends and my family? Yes, THAT I can do.

PS. And, of course, the wise one will "give vent to cries and groans" while being tortured!! They're not Stoics. There should not be any question that a human being will cry out of under severe pain. I'm sure Epicurus let out cries when his kidneys were inflamed and he felt like his insides were being twisted in knots. That's just common sense. He felt the pain. It's not like the memories of past good times removed his pain. That's not what the letter says. He was satisfied with his life, knowing it was coming to an end. Between pangs of severe pain, he took satisfaction in a life well lived.