

Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus: "We Do Not Mean....."

- Sentence Structure Analysis

Post by "Cassius" of July 1, 2019 at 8:37 AM

Here are two translations of the same section of the letter to Menoecus. The left is [the Epicurus wiki at Epicurism.info](#) and the right is [Cyril Bailey's "Epicurus the Extant Remains."](#) I am not able to offer an opinion in the Greek original, but I can offer an opinion on the English wording:

The English wording presented here equates "pleasure" with "absence of pain" as if the two concepts were interchangeable in every respect. My contention is (1) that it is clear to any "normal human" that the two concepts are clearly NOT interchangeable in every respect, (2) that Epicurus was in every relevant respect a "normal human," and (3) that therefore there is (a) some corruption of the text, (b) some corruption or inadequacy of the translation, (c) some missing context that explains the apparent discrepancy, or some combination of (a), (b), and (c).

Note also that this text, even in its current form which appears to equate the two terms, does not state that "absence of pain" is "the highest pleasure" as seems to be regularly assumed in writing on Epicurus. In neither translation is it stated that "the goal" or "the end" is "absence of pain" unless one adds a third equivalency ("pleasure" = "absence of pain" = "the goal / the end") which is also counter-intuitive.

I believe the relationship lies not in "equivalency" but in "quantity" as is referenced in PD3, but there is no doubt that the current English translations are written as if the meaning were clearly "pleasure is equivalent to absence of pain."

If you have the knowledge of Greek sentence structure to comment on how the wording does or does not suggest equivalency, please post your comment. And if you have another theory on how to reconcile this please post that as well.

Epicurus' Letter to Menoecus: "We Do Not Mean...."

131-2) Thus when we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasure of debauchery or sensuality, despite whatever the ignorant, disagreeable, or malignant people believe. By pleasure, we mean this: freedom from pain in the body and freedom from turmoil in the soul. For it is not continuous drinking and revelry, the sexual enjoyment of women and boys, or feasting upon fish and fancy cuisine which result in a happy life. Sober reasoning is what is needed, which decides every choice and avoidance and liberates us from the false beliefs which are the greatest source of anxiety.

131-2) Ὅταν οὖν λέγωμεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὡς τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν· οὐ γὰρ πότοι καὶ κῶμοι συνείροντες οὐδ' ἀπολαύσεις παίδων καὶ γυναικῶν οὐδ' ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσα φέρει πολυτελής τράπεζα, τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾶ βίον, ἀλλὰ νήφων λογισμὸς καὶ τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς καὶ τὰς ὁδοῦς ἐξελαύνων, ἐξ ὧν πλεῖστος τὰς ψυχὰς καταλαμβάνει θόρυβος.

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. For it is not continuous drinkings and revellings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere

Τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις. διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφίας τιμιώτερον ὑπάρχει φρόνησις, ἐξ ἧς αἱ λοιπαὶ πᾶσαι πεφύκασιν ἀρεταί, διδάσκουσα ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν ἡδύς ἤδεις ζῆν ἀνευ τοῦ φρονίμου καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως (οὐδὲ φρονίμου καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως) ἀνευ τοῦ ἡδέως. συμπεφύκασι γὰρ αἱ ἀρεταὶ τῷ ζῆν ἡδέως, καὶ τὸ ζῆν ἡδέως τούτων ἐστὶν ἀχώριστον. ἐπεὶ τίνα νομίζεις εἶναι κρείττονα τοῦ καὶ περὶ θεῶν ὅσα δοξάζοντος καὶ περὶ θανάτου διὰ παντὸς ἀφόβως ἔχοντος καὶ τὸ τῆς φύσεως ἐπιλελογισμένου τέλος, καὶ τὸ μὲν τῶν ἀγαθῶν πέρας ὡς ἔστιν εὐσημπλήρωτόν 5 τε καὶ εὐπόριστον διαλαμβάνοντος, τὸ δὲ τῶν κακῶν ὡς ἡ εἰσαγομένη πάντων ἐγγελοῦτος (εἰμαρμένη; * * * * * ὧν ἂ