

Episode 295 - Plutarch's Absurd Interpretation of Epicurean Absence of Pain

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Wow! Well and passionately said! Are you sure you even *need* me for the Plutarch episode? I feel like we could just wind you up and let you go.

In 7, Plutarch goes on about Epicurus' quote (and it is a quote) that "The very essence of good arises from the escaping of bad, and a man's recollecting, considering, and rejoicing within himself that this hath befallen him. For what occasions transcending joy (he saith) is some great impending evil escaped; and in this lies the very nature and essence of good, if a man attain unto it aright, and contain himself when he hath done, and not ramble and prate idly about it." [U423, source: This section of Plutarch]

[An alternative translation:](#)

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" - their good - is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

Ibid., 8, p. 1091E: Thus Epicurus, and Metrodorus too, suppose {that the middle is the summit and the end} when they take the position that escape from ill is the reality and upper limit of the good.

Plutarch whines about this "escape from evil" and the memory of this being the Epicureans' "highest good" and then turns around in other sections ([13](#)) to castigate the Epicureans for taking joy in festivals (but not in engaging in critical arguments about music and poetry):

Quote

Epicurus saith, when he pronounceth in his book called his Doubts that his wise man ought to be a lover of public spectacles and to delight above any other man in the music and shows of the Bacchanals (ἀκροάμασι καὶ θεάμασι Διονυσιακοῖς); and yet he will not admit of music problems or of the critical enquiries of [p. 177] philologists, no,

not so much as at a comotation. Yea, he advises such princes as are lovers of the Muses rather to entertain themselves at their feasts either with some narration of military adventures or with the importune scurrilities of drolls and buffoons, than to engage in disputes about music or in questions of poetry. For this very thing he had the face to write in his treatise of Monarchy, as if he were writing to Sardanapalus, or to Nanarus satrap of Babylon. For neither would a Hiero nor an Attalus nor an Archelaus be persuaded to make a Euripides, a Simonides, a Melanippides, a Crates, or a Diodotus rise up from their tables, and to place such scaramuchios in their rooms as a Cardax, an Agrias, or a Callias, or fellows like Thrasonides and Thrasyleon, to make people disorder the house with hollowing and clapping.

Plutarch is all over the place, in Section 16-17 he rails against Metrodorus:

Quote

And are not Metrodorus's words something like to these when he writes to his brother thus: It is none of our business to preserve the Greeks, or to get them to bestow garlands upon us for our wit, but to eat well and drink good wine, Timocrates, so as not to offend but pleasure our stomachs. And he saith again, in some other place in the same epistles: How gay and how assured was I, when I had once learned of Epicurus the true way of gratifying my stomach; for, believe me, philosopher Timocrates, our prime good lies at the stomach. In brief, these men draw out the dimensions of their pleasures like a circle, about the stomach as a centre. And the truth is, it is impossible for those men ever to participate of generous and princely joy, such as enkindles a height of spirit in us and sends forth to all mankind an unmade hilarity and calm serenity, that have taken up a sort of life that is confined, unsocial, inhuman, and uninspired [p. 184] towards the esteem of the world and the love of mankind.

You can't have it both ways, and both Plutarch and Cicero seem to ascribe both debauchery and ascetism to the Epicurean school. It can't be both, and so it comes across as stereotyping, hyperbole, or caricature.