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

Post by “Cassius” of August 22, 2025 at 8:38 AM

This is a long quote but think the forum software will provide a collapsible box so it doesn't break the flow of the thread. The analysis is perverse just as DeWitt describes it, but it's well worth reading in full as an expansive interpretation in modern language of Plutarch's criticism. This is a position that is widespread and if you're a fan of Epicurus you need to understand the argument and have a position on why it is wrong. Rolfe who is asking the question and Don who read Plutarch recently for the podcast will definitely see how it tracks.

> Quote from P.E. More - "Hellenistic Philosophies"
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> The difficulty that confronts us when we try to understand Epicurus is the extraordinary paradox of his logic. What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins with regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content? There is no possibility, I think, of really reconciling this blunt contradiction, which was sufficiently obvious to the enemies of Epicurus in antiquity, but it is possible, with the aid of Plutarch’s shrewd analysis, to follow him step by step from his premises to his conclusions, and so to discover the source of his entanglement. [Note 1]
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> Epicurus began with the materialistic and monistic theses which had allured Aristippus, and which, mingled in varying proportions from the teaching of Heraclitus and Protagoras and Democritus, had come to be the prevailing belief of the Greek people; they were, indeed, no more than the essence refined out of the voluble lecturing and debating of the so-called sophists against whom Socrates and Plato had waged a relentless but unsuccessful warfare. This visible palpable world of bodies is the only reality, and the only thing which to man, in such a world, has any certain value is his own immediate physical sensations. Pleasure we feel and pain we feel, in their various degrees and complications; and we know that all men welcome pleasure and shrink from pain by a necessity of nature. Pleasure, in fact, is simply a name for the sensation which we do welcome, and pain for the sensation from which we do shrink. The example of infants and animals is before us to nullify any attempt to argue away this primary distinction.
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> These are the premises of Epicurus, as they had been of Aristippus, and to these he will cling through thick and thin, whatever their consequences may be and however they may entangle him in self-contradictions.He seems even to have gone out of his way at times to find the grossest terms to express the doctrine, whether his motive was to

shock the Philistines of morality or to fortify himself and his friends in their positive belief. The avowed programme of the school was “not to save the Greeks, but to indulge the belly to the limit of safety with meat and drink”; and in a letter to a friend Epicurus says: “I invite you to continuous pleasures, not to virtues that unsettle the mind with vain and empty hopes of fruition.”

The programme is simple enough in all conscience, and might satisfy the most cynical votary of the flesh, but, desiring like his predecessor to be a voluptuary, Epicurus was driven despite himself to be a philosopher, even more a philosopher than the Cyrenaic, whether his wisdom came from deeper reflection or greater timidity. His experience might be described as the opposite of that of Johnson’s humble acquaintance who had been trying all his life to attain philosophy but failed because cheerfulness would break in. Aristippus could make a boast of his *Habeo, non habeor,* but, however he might twist about, his dependence on the fleeting sensation of the moment left him at last a prey to the hazards of circumstance.

Clearly the hedonist who was enough of a philosopher to aim at liberty and security must embrace a wider view of life than the Cyrenaic; and so the first step of Epicurus was to take happiness, conceived as a continuous state of pleasure, rather than particular pleasures, for the goal. This is the initial, and perhaps the most fundamental, difference between the strictly Epicurean and the Cyrenaic brand of hedonism.

But how, taking individual pleasures still in the grossly physical sense, was a man to assure himself of their consummation in happiness? It was well to make a god of the belly and, in the Epicurean language, of any other passage of the body that admitted pleasure and not pain, but, as soon as he began to reflect, the philosopher was confronted by the ugly fact that the entrances of pain are more numerous than those of pleasure, and that the paroxysms of pain may surpass in intensity any conceivable pleasure. He saw that there was something ephemeral and insecure in the very nature of pleasure, whereas pain had terrible rights over the flesh, and could dispute her domain with a vigour far beyond the power of her antagonist. Evidently, in a world so constituted, the aim of the philosopher will be lowered from a bold search for sensations to the humbler task of attaining some measure of security against forces he cannot control; and so, I think, we shall interpret the curious phenomenon that the greatest of all hedonists was driven to a purely defensive attitude towards life.

On the one hand he knew, as Plato had shown, that the recovery from disease and the relief from anguish do bring a sense of active well-being, and hence it was possible for him to define pleasure in negative terms without seeming to contradict flagrantly his grosser views about the belly and other bodily organs. Again, since positive pleasure and pain by some law of nature are so intimately bound together that the cessation of one is associated with access of the other,[2] then, clearly, the only pleasure free of this unpleasant termination is that which is itself not positively induced but comes as

the result of receding pain. For the content of happiness, therefore, the Epicurean will look to sensation of a negative sort : “The limit of pleasure is reached by the removal of all that gives pain,” and “Pleasure in the flesh admits no increase, when once the pain of want is removed; it can only be variegated.”[3] But the philosopher cannot stop here, Such a state of release, though in itself it may not be subject to the laws of alternative pleasure and pain, is yet open to interruption from the hazards of life. And so Epicurus, in his pursuit of happiness, is carried a step further.

Not on the present possession of pleasure, whether positive or negative, will he depend for security of happiness, but on the power of memory. Here, at least, we appear to be free and safe, for memory is our own. Nothing can deprive us of that recollected joy, “which is the bliss of solitude” ; even what was distressful at the time may often, by some alchemy of the mind, be transmuted into a happy reminiscence:

‘Things which offend when present, and affright, In memory, well painted, move delight." [Note 4]

The true hedonism, then, will be a creation in the mind from material furnished it by the body. Plutarch describes the procedure of Epicurus thus, and exposes also its inadequacy: Seeing that the field of joy in our poor bodies cannot be smooth and equal, but harsh and broken and mingled with much that is contrary, he transfers the exercise of philosophy from the flesh, as from a lean and barren soil, to the mind, in the hopes of enjoying there, as it were, large pastures and fair meadows of delight. Not in the body but in the soul is the true garden of the Epicurean to be cultivated. It might seem as if by the waving of a magic wand we had been translated from a materialistic hedonism to a region like that in which Socrates and Plato looked for unearthly happiness.

But in fact there is no such magic for the Epicurean. The source of the pleasures which compose our happiness is still physical, and only physical; the office of the soul, so-called, is merely to retain by an act of selective memory the scattered impressions of sensuous pleasure and to forestall these by an act of selective expectation. If you hear the Epicurean crying out and testifying that the soul has no power of joy and tranquility save in what it draws from the flesh, and that this is its only good, what can you say but that he uses the soul as a kind of vessel to receive the strainings from the body, as men rack wine from an old and leaky jar into a new one to take age, and so think they have done some wonderful thing.

And no doubt wine may be kept and mellowed with time, but the soul preserves no more than a feeble scent of what it takes into memory; for pleasure, as soon as it has given out one hiss in the body, forthwith expires, and that little of it which lags behind in memory is but flat and like a queasy fume, as if a man should undertake to feed himself today on the stale recollection of what he ate and drank yesterday. What the Epicureans have is but the empty shadow and dream of a pleasure that has taken wing

and fled away, and that serves but for fuel to foment their untamed desires, as in sleep the unreal satisfaction of thirst and love only stings to a sharper lust of waking intemperance.

Memory, though it promise a release from the vicissitudes of fortune, is still too dependent on the facts of life, too deeply implicated in the recurrence of passionate desires. There is no finality of happiness here, and so the Epicurean is driven on to further refinement. If pushed hard, he will take refuge in imagining a possible painlessness of the body and a possible stability of untroubled ease. Life itself, in some rare instances, may afford the substance of this comfort, and memory then will be sufficient; but if the substance eludes us, we have still that within us which by the exercise of free will can lull the mind into fancying it remembers what it never possessed. Step by step the reflective hedonist has been driven by the lessons of experience from the pursuit of positive pleasure to acquiescence in pleasure conceived as the removal of pain; from present ease in the flesh to the subtilizing power of memory in the mind, and, when memory is starved, to the voluntary imagination that life has gone well with him. The fabled ataraxy, or imperturbable calm, of the Epicurean turns out to be something very like a pale beatitude of illusory abstraction from the tyranny of facts, the wilful mirage of a soul which imagines itself, but is not really, set apart from the material universe of chance and change.

Habeo non habeor, was the challenge of Aristippus to the world; the master of the Garden will be content with the more modest half : *Non Habeor.* There is something to startle the mind in this defensive conclusion of a philosophy which opened its attack on life under such brave and flaunting colours. There is much to cause reflection when one considers how in the end hedonism is forced into an unnatural conjunction with the other monistic philosophy with which its principles are in such violent conflict. For this ataraxy of the avowed lover of ease and pleasure can scarcely be distinguished from the apathy which the Stoic devotees of pain and labour glorified as the goal of life. This is strange. It is stranger still, remembering this negative conclusion of Epicurean and Stoic, by which good becomes a mere deprivation of evil, to cast the mind forward to the metaphysics of another and later school of monism which led the Neoplatonist to reckon evil as a mere deprivation of good. Into such paradoxical combinations and antagonisms we are driven as soon as we try to shun the simple truth that good is good and evil is evil, each in its own right and judged by its immediate effect in the soul. It may appear from the foregoing that the hedonist, in his pursuit of the *summum bonum,* argues from point to point in a straight line; in practice he seems rather to follow no single guide, but to fluctuate between two disparate yet inseparable motives.

At one time, in a world where physical sensation is the only criterion of truth, the basis of all reality, the liberty of enjoyment is the lure that draws him on; at another time, in a world of chance and change or of mechanical law which takes no great heed of our wants, it seems as if security from misadventure must be the limit of man’s desire.

> Other philosophers, the Platonist in his vision of the world of Ideas, the Christian in his submission to the will of God, may see their way running straight before them to the one sure goal of spiritual happiness, in which liberty and security join hands. The path of the hedonist wavers from side to side, aiming now at positive pleasure and now at mere escape from pain; and this, I take it, is one of the curious reprisals of truth, that the dualist should have in view a single end, whereas the monist should be distracted by a double purpose. Whether one or the other of the revolving objects shall stand out clearer before the hedonist's gaze, will depend perhaps chiefly upon his temperament. With an Aristippus the pleasure of the moment is supreme, though he too will have his eye open for the need of safety; with an Epicurus, more timid by nature and more reflective, the thought of security at the last will almost, if never quite, obliterate the enticement of pleasure. It was still as a good Epicurean that Horace could write:
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> *Speme voluptates, nocet empta dolore voluptas.*
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> [Note 1: *Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum,* I draw freely on the racy language of the old English translation.]
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> [Note 2: This association of pleasure and pain was familiar to Plato, He refers to it in Phaedo 60b, and deals with it at greater length in the Philebus.]
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> [Note 3: Sayings 3 and 18. In my quotations I sometimes adopt the language of the excellent versions in R. D. Hicks's Stoic and Epicurean.]
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> [Note 4: Cowley, Upon His Majesty's Bestoration.]
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