

Horace - Buying Pleasure With Pain is Harmful (????)

Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 11:21 AM

Thanks again Don, those are very helpful leads and we can pursue this into the future as time allows.

Yes it seems to be commonly noted that Horace was more Epicurean when younger than older, but I've never seen much explanation behind those general comments.

Below is more of the Latin from your wikisource link. So there's clearly a first imperative clause that reads *spurn pleasures* / "Sperne voluptates.... followed by a new thought.

I would think that the best hope for a saving construction would be that the clause/phrase after that is intended to restrict the meaning to "spurn those pleasures that cause more pleasure than pain." My Latin is not good enough to be confident of any construction, but it sure doesn't look at first glance like his choice of words goes in that direction. In fact at this point it's hard to imagine much of a different construction - everything adds up to something like "Spurn pleasures; pleasures acquired by pain are harmful." And I see that as entirely contrary to the heart of what Epicurus was saying. Life constantly presents options where choices have to be made whether to engage in activities that are painful in order to acquire pleasures that are more worthwhile.

It's possible that as a mirror to the redefined meaning of "pleasure" there was also a redefinition of "pain" so that all sorts of effort that we would consider struggle and involving pain might fall outside the Epicurean definition of pain. However I don't see the texts going in that direction - does anyone? Given the expansive definition of pleasure we should probably be open to concluding that Epicurus had a narrow reading of "pain," but if so I'm not sure the texts we have really indicate that interpretation. I know there's reference to not needing to pursue desires involving "struggle" so maybe the possibility exists that the argument was being made, by Horace or others, to the effect that *painful exertion which causes greater pleasure in the end should not be considered pain at all*. But at the moment I don't see that as likely.

If so that's definitely something for us to pursue and clarify, but it seems more likely that this is more attributable to Horace being depressed post-Philippi.

Nodictionaries has the component words as:

Sperne uoluptates; nocet empta dolore uoluptas.

sperno, spernere, spreui, spretus scorn, despise, spurn

voluptas, voluptatis F pleasure, delight, enjoyment

noceo, nocere, nocui, nocitus harm, hurt; injure

emo, emere, emi, emptus buy; gain, acquire, obtain

dolor, doloris M pain, anguish, grief, sorrow, suffering; resentment, indignation

voluptas, voluptatis F pleasure, delight, enjoyment

More of the Latin:

Quote

Non domus et fundus, non aeris aceruus et auri
aegroto domini deduxit corpore febris,
non animo curas; ualeat possessor oportet,
si comportatis rebus bene cogitat uti. [50](#)

Qui cupit aut metuit, iuuat illum sic domus et res
ut lippum pictae tabulae, fomenta podagram,
auriculas citharae collecta sorde dolentis.

Sincerum est nisi uas, quodcumque infundis acescit.

Sperne uoluptates; nocet empta dolore uoluptas. [55](#)

Semper auarus eget; certum uoto pete finem.

Inuidus alterius macrescit rebus opimis;
inuidia Siculi non inuenere tyranni
maius tormentum. Qui non moderabitur irae,
infectum uolet esse, dolor quod suaserit et mens, [60](#)
dum poenas odio per uim festinat inulto.

Ira furor breuis est; animum rege, qui nisi paret,
imperat, hunc frenis, hunc tu compesce catena.

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