

Episode 308 - TD36 - Tracing Epicurus' Key Ideas From the Principal Doctrines To The Tetrpharmakon To Cicero's Epicurean Speakers

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This podcast will be released later today. In the meantime another note:

In discussing the tetrpharmakon i make the comment around 28 minutes in that people often have a problem with the use of the term "easy" as it applies to the good being easy to get and the bad being easy to endure.

In connection with other points being made in recent episodes, I am going to explore over time this possibility that i have not ordinarily stressed:

(1) it is clear that Epicurus saw the need to address the challenge made in [Philebus](#) and other places that the highest good must "have a limit" as stated also in [PD03](#).

(2) I have previously taken the position that Epicurus was meeting that challenge by stating that when all pain is eliminated that is by definition or theory the limit of pleasure, and I do continue to think that makes sense.

(3) In the past however I have dismissed this argument as having further implications and therefore did not apply it further, and that led me to the tendency to dismiss the argument as having any real merit on its own.

(4) However on thinking further I now begin to believe that Epicurus did not mean to diminish the importance of the argument, and that he in fact embraced it himself in his own presentation.

(5) By now in this list my direction is probably clear: of course this tetrpharmakos wording was not as far as we know from Epicurus himself, so the "easy" is what is suspicious. I now want to explore the possibility that the real meaning of what is captured here is not that what is good is necessarily "easy" to get, but that what is good (pleasure) is "attainable" because in fact it is graspable in full, it "has a limit" that enables it to be grasped.

(6) the same will go for pain in the fourth leg. The point would not be that the terrible is "easy" to avoid or endure, but that it is in fact "attainable" to endure it because it too has a limit - it cannot remain forever because death will terminate even the worst pain.

Epicurus never says in [PD03](#) or [PD04](#) that what is good or bad is "easy" to reach. That's an overlay of the tendency of some people to focus on "absence of pain" as being akin to nothingness and therefore "easy" to obtain. The argument Epicurus is addressing, and then picking up for his own use is clearly different from that. The point is more likely to be that what is truly good and bad in life is not some fantasy of idealistic divine perfection, or evil in the sense of a supernatural force or eternal punishment in hell. What is true is instead that the good (pleasure) is attainable, and the bad (pain) is avoidable, because they "have a limit" which cannot be exceeded.

This line of thinking would parallel other recent comments I have made that, as Torquatus is stressing, the key to the understanding of the natural and necessary desire analysis is that it helps to analyze whether the goal of the desire is in fact attainable, and therefore reasonable to pursue, or in fact unattainable, and therefore unreasonable by definition to pursue.

The fact that most people fail miserably in achieving happiness and avoiding disaster is proof that none of this is "easy," and I don't think Epicurus would have agreed with that kind of phrasing. I doubt Epicurus considered at the end of his life that all of his efforts to build his school had been "easy" at all, and in fact I think he would have resented the implication.