

# "Choice" and "Avoidance"

**Post by "Don" of February 28, 2020 at 3:14 PM**

A foundational practice of Epicureans, both ancient and modern, is the exercise of what is usually referred to as "choice and avoidance." Epicurus' own writings return regularly to this. Cicero and Seneca both mention this in relation to Epicureans. Philodemus and Lucretius discuss the importance of "choice and avoidance." It is one of the most fundamental practices we do as we do all things as if Epicurus were watching. The standard, ubiquitous translation in scholarly and popular texts alike is "choice and avoidance."

However, the word "avoidance" strikes me as making this decision less immediate, less urgent, and less important than it truly is. We "avoid" mud puddles as we walk. We "avoid" potholes on the road. We "avoid" eating fatty foods. I know we're not into definitions, best with me one moment: Merriam-Webster defines "avoid" as "to keep away from : shun" and simply "to refrain from." To me, these make avoidance sound passive, like nothing more than keeping our distance from something and not truly confronting the options with which we must deal on a moment-by-moment basis. These definitions dance around the ideas conveyed by the Epicurean "choice and avoidance" practice, and the word itself strikes me as inadequate.

So, I returned to the sources. Epicurus urges us to say what we mean without obfuscation. What are the actual words that Epicurus used when speaking of "choice and avoidance"? Epicurus didn't speak English. So how did he himself convey this idea in Greek? What would Epicurus' prolepsis be off his words?

We can begin by looking at the title of Epicurus' lost work, Περὶ Αἰρέσεων καὶ Φυγῶν [Peri Haireseōn kai Phugōn] or On Choice and Avoidance as it's usually translated. First, the ending -ων is plural and would suggest, at least, On Choices and Avoidances, but that's the least of our concerns right now.

Let's take the first noun: αἰρέσεων, the genitive plural of αἵρεσις (hairesis). Αἵρεσις does indeed mean a deliberate choice, and it is also, coincidentally, the origin of the English word heresy. So, for now, we can accept that "choice" is an acceptable choice, as it were, to translate that word of the title.

Φυγῶν, on the other hand, is the genitive plural of φυγή [phugē] with connotations such as "flight in battle; dative φυγῇ adverbially, in hasty flight" and "flight or escape from a thing, avoidance of it." So, φυγῶν doesn't simply connote "avoidance" but the fleeing from something or the hasty escape from something. One doesn't simply "avoid" conflict in a battle; one runs from it. It is a matter of urgency!

So at this point, the title of Epicurus' work might better be conveyed by *Concerning Choices and Fleeing*. What other words does Epicurus use to convey the practice of "'choice' and

'avoidance'?"

Consider Principal Doctrine 25: "If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether **to avoid or pursue something**, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony." Here we are told to decide "whether to avoid or pursue something" εἴ τε φυγήν εἴ τε δίωξις. We encounter φυγήν again, but now αἵρεσις "choice" is replaced by δίωξις meaning "chase, pursuit." So, "choice and avoidance" in this case takes on a sense of "from what should I flee or what should I pursue." Again, giving us a richer sense of the practice.

A last instance I'll consider is Epicurus' *Letter to Menoikos* where we read: "we honor [pleasure] in everything we accept or reject" in one translation of a line and "[Pleasure] is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion" in another translation of the same line. In these, we are to "accept and reject" or to engage in "choice" and "aversion." What does the original say? Αἵρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς. The same words as the title of the lost book, but this time with different shades of meaning in translations.

In conclusion, "choice and avoidance" takes on a much deeper and richer sense for me if I go back to our founder's words. We must use English words like "choice," "chase," "pursuit," and "accept" to convey the full range of meaning of the first term; and "avoidance," "flight," "escape," "rejection," and "aversion" for the second. It's not simply "choosing" one option. It's not simply stepping around something to "avoid" it. It goes further than that.

Personally, I prefer to paraphrase the title of Epicurus' work and to refer to our practice by something like *On Acceptance and Rejection* or *On Pursuit and Flight*, or even *On Things to Choose and Things from which to Flee*. There are pains we should accept, and pleasures from which we should flee. There are pleasures we should pursue, and pains from which we should escape before they capture us. To me, this makes us much more responsible for our decisions περὶ αἵρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν and much more active in our lives than if we're simply picking one thing and stepping around something else. We are weighing the implications of our options and consciously pursuing the correct course of action or fleeing from the negative course as if from a terrible battle to literally save our lives.

I'm curious to hear other takes on whether it matters what we call this practice. Or do we just do it!

May you practice well! Εὖ πράττειν!