

Gosling & Taylor, The Greeks on Pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of June 26, 2020 at 9:20 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The fact that they are both negative (a- "not, no" as in apolitical, atheist, etc.) has struck me as odd; but, as descriptors of pleasure, I think I can see where Epicurus is coming from

It has always seemed to me that "part" of the reason it makes sense to use the negative is that given the premise that everything that is not painful is pleasurable (and the reverse) if you end up talking about specific pleasures, you end up appearing to take sides on what amounts to a ranking of pleasures, which is also a problem. If you talk about cake and pies and ice cream you get labeled as a foodie. If you talk about exploring mountaintops or bicycling or sex or wine or any other particular pleasure, you end up implying that the pleasure which you choose to highlight is among those that "everyone" should choose. If you end up praising the pleasure of painting, or of singing, or of literature, you end up implying that the best life involves those pursuits, when in fact your key and essential premise is that pleasure really is pleasure and totally subjective according to context. Therefore it is essential that you emphasize that there is NOT a ranking or a preferred set of pleasures.

I don't think that's the full explanation by any means. I would expect in the texts that are lost there are lots of discussions of specific pleasures. But I think that this is related to the issue of Epicurus ejecting "logic" from the canon - the commentators make it appear that Epicurus was throwing out all logic and all "culture" when in fact Epicurus was among the most acute logicians and culture-erectors of them all (a point I think DeWitt makes). He doesn't throw out logic and culture, but uses them himself, in his own way, in the service of what he has concluded is the ultimate end (pleasure). His opponents are so adamantly opposed to his conclusion that they caricature him as being opposed to ALL logic and ALL culture, when in fact he was opposed to THEIR logic and THEIR culture, and erecting his own. But they succeeded in erasing the texts where Epicurus presented the positive elements of his program, and what's left can be made to look like something it was not.

All of which is to say that the "negative" approach may be in part an intensely "logical" approach, driven by the underlying premise that it is essential to drive home that all pleasure is desirable. The "negative" wording allows that premise to be driven home without suggesting that some pleasures are higher or better than others (which, if admitted, would logically mean that there is a standard other than pleasure itself by which to judge pleasure).