

Post At Modern Epicurean Blog - "Epicurean Ethics Considered And Defended"

Post by "Cassius" of September 7, 2020 at 10:33 AM

I consider this article linked and attached here to worth reading as a step in the right direction - but one for which many more steps are needed. It's another effort to wrestle with the "absence of pain" issue, and I think it ends up much closer to the right place than most do, but I would go much further. Here is an edited version of my comments to the blogger, which I think are best placed here before the article is linked:

The article is an analysis of work by Toby Sherman, who writes (and these are not the words of the writer of the blog) "*This is because kinetic pleasures gain their value from their ability to reduce our sum of pain.*" Put another way, kinetic pleasure is "remedial" and takes its "value...in the removal of what is bad."

I would call this almost "offensive" to me -- or better stated it just shows the kind of attitude that I have no sympathy with. Kinetic pleasures do not "gain their value from their ability to reduce our sum of pain." All pleasure is desirable in and of itself, and not for consequences relating to displacing of pain. PLEASURE is the motivating force of life, darn it, not running from pain! And I am not sure there is any bridge-building possible or desirable between people who see the world based purely on running from pain. For the thousandth time, if you really want to eliminate pain from life, there is one sure method for achieving that! The holding of "running from pain" as the meaning of life is the true "stoic" mentality, it seems to me, and I believe that the proper response to that is to recoil from it like recoiling at a snake - and then be prepared to strike back at it and eliminate it from your mind as a legitimate perspective on life.

And for Sherman to say that that it is possible to construct a "plausible" interpretation of Epicurus' views. How ridiculous - Epicurus' views of pleasure - when read as a whole and not through the modern commentators - are very clear for anyone who doesn't have that stoic run-from-pain mindset!

Of course I know there are many people who are exactly that way, and I feel very sorry for them, but we cannot allow them to monopolize Epicurus and keep "the truth" away from people who have a normal and healthy view of life, who not only need it just as much, but have the capability of understanding it and using it.

It looks like Sherman gets around to the Gosling and Taylor common sense understanding of the issue as a "full tank of positive pleasures of all kind" but it's painful to go through all the apologizing and stoicizing first.

Here's a clip:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1684-post-at-modern-epicurean-blog-epicurean-ethics-considered-and-defended/?postID=8849#post8849>

Let's consider a state in which I have reached perfect contentment. As Sherman puts it, "...let us say that I am sitting comfortably, and that my mind is not stressed. Everything is fine. I am experiencing no pain and am therefore at the Epicurean limit of pleasure. Nothing could make my life more pleasant. But this seems ludicrous: I could be having an amazing time experiencing all kinds of pleasures and that would be vastly superior to this painless state. Epicurus must be wrong." Sherman thinks this objection fails, because not having any obvious pain is necessary for perfect contentment, but not sufficient.

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My problem here is that the objection does not just "fail" -- it is absurd, ridiculous, offensive, and numerous other action adjectives, and it should be treated as such. I would perhaps make a small exception for the example of a doctor in a hospital full of homicidal maniacs who take such a position, and for such a doctor it might be suicide to enlighten them as to their mania. And so such a doctor might well hold his tongue or even agree with the maniacs to their face in order to escape from them. Which, come to think of it, is an approximately accurate description of most of the academic world today, so maybe I should cut Sherman some slack.

"*The Stoic account (and, of course, the Epicurean) places the control of desire at the centre of happiness.*" << I would not say that is accurate as to Epicureans. Yes desires are to be understood and pursued intelligently, but not "at the center" or as a goal in itself, as the Stoics seem to do. And the type of control and other aspects of the "control" issue are hugely different.

"*Sherman says that any example which tries to prove that pleasure can be increased beyond perfect painlessness can be argued to show that the person experiencing said pleasure has yet to reach perfect Epicurean contentment.*" <<< My issue with that passage is that "contentment" is very misleading in the current age. It sounds like in most ears as the equivalent of sleep - doing absolutely nothing - and if you're working on making this into a practical philosophy, you probably should avoid a word that has so much negative baggage and inaccuracy. As long as we focus on tranquility and contentment and words like that, we'll never capture the core direction.

I think the whole issue at stake here is answered in this from On Ends:

"*The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which *****will not admit of further improvement.****"*

The "will not admit of further improvement" is the full and complete answer to the problem that Sherman will never solve by calling this state "contentment."

THIS is the sentence that people need to focus on and embrace: " Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?"

OK with that intro, here is the article, with a copy attached here too:
<http://www.themodernepicurean.com/2020/09/06/epi...d-and-defended/>