

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 8, 2020 at 6:10 PM

Here's my extended reply, and I am glad that Jordan restated his assertion that "the greatest pleasure is painlessness" because that's exactly the rhetorical form I reject most emphatically. He posted that while I was preparing this:

Let me rearrange and edit some of the comments that Jordan and I have had in private conversation about this. Jordan's view is that Sherman says that the total absence of pain is the absolute most pleasure you could possibly feel, and hence the importance of removing pain. You pointed out that if the idea that painlessness is the greatest amount of pleasure you can feel sounds counter-intuitive, then, in Sherman's words, that's a failure of imagination

My view of all of this is that rather than failure of imagination, dwelling on "absence of pain" as a complete definition of the best life amounts to giving in to a stoic suppression of emotion" argument.

If "pleasure" is the guide of life, as Epicurus clearly held, why not state that forcefully and clearly and not leave it for imagination? Why dance around the issue?

But let me be clear, I think Epicurus DID state that forcefully and clearly, and that the error is in those who want to seize onto a limited part of the discussion and elevate that limited aspect into the full and complete goal, which it was never intended to be.

Epicurus said that clarify is essential, so I think the manner of speaking is very important, especially when a crusade against "pleasure as the goal" is exactly what Stoics and Platonists and Religionists do every time they mention Epicurus.

So why talk incessantly in the enemies' terms? Why try to assuage our enemies' concerns and sensibilities at the expense of clarity, while our own lives and the lives of those we value is so short?

Again, I don't think Epicurus was guilty of lack of clarity. What Epicurus was "guilty" of, if anything, was failing to anticipate that people in the ages after him would totally forget the context in which he worked, and ignore the fact that in Epicurus' day, there were important arguments made by prior philosophers against holding pleasure to be the guide of life which demanded to be addressed.

Jordan you state at the beginning of your article that "...I'm interested in Epicureanism as a practical philosophy for modern living - a kind of secular replacement for my lost religion." I very much agree that that is a good goal, and because it is a good goal, not just for you but for

a very wide number of people, the replacement needs to be worded in terms that are clear, and focused on the true motivating principle. It's not practical or efficient for most people to set their sights around things that are less than the very most important. That very most important question is most frequently discussed as "What is THE goal of human life?" That question demands to be answered first and most clearly, rather than chasing tangents which might be helpful to deflect opposing arguments, but nevertheless remain tangential to the central issue of what we should in fact focus our attention on pursuing.

And in setting out that goal, in answering that question about what is THE goal of human life, giving the answer as "painlessness" is just about the most DE-motivating and DE-pressing answer that I can imagine. And in case it's not clear why it's demotivating and depressing to practical people, practical people know that the only way to reach true painlessness is through suicide - since "death" is the only guarantee we have for the end of pain. Now I know that you object to that formulation, and we'll have to agree to disagree, but I am comfortable that reasonable people who aren't tripped up by word games realize that the only practical way to completely avoid pain is to end our lives, and that's not a reasonable formulation of why life is worth living.

It certainly sounds like from the record that Epicurus faced this same question of identifying the central goal, and that he came up with "Pleasure" as the answer. I think it's safe to say that that's why Torquatus is recorded to have said: "We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil."

You seem to advocate that our primary aim in life should be to eliminate pain, because you think that that is the way to bring about the greatest pleasure. I do not agree at all that Epicurus saw that as his message. I think he saw his message as "pleasure" as that word is ordinarily understood, to be achieved as he recommended through associating with friends, through all the pleasurable activities of food and dance and music and art and all the innumerable pleasing activities that are part of life, including all aspects of the study of nature, and the intelligent application of physics, epistemology, and ethics.

I think Epicurus also gained great pleasure from the combating of error in the world around him, and that's in large part why we have the Principle Doctrines organized as they are, rather than as a set of positive instructions on how to prepare food, and manage property, and make love, and all the other assorted ways to gain pleasures. Epicurus was a fighter, and a teacher, and a doctor, so he chose in the list of Principle Doctrines to combat false ideas by giving easy-to-remember antidotes. He addressed the false views of gods in PD1 and gave the answer that gods by nature do not cause troubles. He addressed the false ideas about death through PD2, by giving the answer that all troubles come through sensation, and death is the end of sensation and therefore of all troubles. And he addressed the false ideas of the Platonists who contended that pleasure cannot be the goal of life, because it has no limit, in PD3, by pointing out that the logical limit of pleasure is when ALL of our life's experiences are full of pleasures

rather than of pains. There's nothing mystical or counter-intuitive in PD3, or in the letter to Menoeceus in the parts you are thinking of, because all they do is establish that pleasure has a limit and therefore pleasure can logically qualify as the goal of life. In my view, people who take your position are mistaking a logical argument for an ultimate practical expression of how to spend your time. You don't do that in regard to PD1 about gods or PD2 about death, and you shouldn't do it in regard to PD3 about pleasure either.

The great weight of the records of Epicurus's teachings all revolve around a very common-sense viewpoint that Pleasure is to be pursued and pain to be avoided. That's why Torquatus' summary quoted above is the best and clearest statement of the positive goal.

You've said to me in the past that "the way to ultimate pleasure is the removal of pain." It seems to me that I've seen those kind of formulations regularly in writings about Epicurus on the internet, and that sounds like it's advocating some painlessness as some special kind of pleasure, which I don't see at all. That's the subject of Elayne's article referring to "Fancy Pleasure" [here on Epicureanfriends](#). As I see it, pleasure means pleasure as ordinary people understand it, and Epicurus' references to painlessness are nothing more than references to ordinary pleasures unaccompanied by any mixture of pain.

I think you'll likely conclude that we're really talking just terminology or semantics, but I think it is a huge hurdle to convince a normal and reasonable person that "painlessness" is an acceptable definition of the goal of life. Moreover, I don't think there's any reason to even consider trying to do that, because the goal is easily describable in ordinary words, as did Torquatus: " 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?"

That's why I strongly resist embracing the terminology of "absence of pain" or "painlessness" as anything other than in a very limited technical context, suitable for discussing logical arguments with well-educated philosophy students, but absolutely *unsuitable* as a practical guide for living. To me, when you set off with your goal defined as avoiding something, you'll never intelligently find your way to where you want to be, which is a life spent with the maximum number of pleasures while experiencing the least number of avoidable pains consistent with the attainment of those pleasures.

Again, the way most people in my experience function best is to positively identify what their goal is, and go after that goal. By nature and by consequence they end up avoiding the other things which are not their goal, and thereby they arrive at their life of pleasure with minimum pain. If they simply blind themselves to positive goal-setting and say simply "I want to avoid pain" then in my view they will never necessarily end up anywhere. Were they rigorously logical

they would choose death as the most effective way to avoid pain, just as Epicurus suggested in his letter to Menoeceus, but that's more of a joke to healthy people than a serious hazard, because setting "avoiding pain" as a logical goal simply makes no sense to normal people.

But on that point, "avoiding pain" is not a joke to people who are hurting with any of the numerous kinds of depression that are so common today. It's relatively easy for us to joke and say that "painlessness" is our goal, because we who (we hope) are relatively healthy can wink and nod and realize that what we are saying has no practical content, and go on about our way pursuing pleasure rather than worrying about pain hiding under every bed. But we get lots of people interested in Epicurus who come to us in less-than-optimum mental condition, and if they hear that "painlessness" is the goal of life, then such people are apt to take that argument in exactly the wrong kind of direction to make matters worse for them.

In the end, I cannot shake the feeling that "painlessness" is a negative way of looking at things, while "pleasure" is the positive perspective, and in my experience it is essential to identify the positive goal as the starting point of all progress.

Now in closing I want to address one more aspect of this. Over the last couple of months in going through the Lucretius podcasts, I more convinced than ever that the "absence of pain" formulation was purely a logical construct being used against the anti-pleasure argument we've discussed before that appears in [Philebus](#) and other sources. Going through Lucretius, I've seen it observed that Lucretius(Epicurus) might have gone further than they should have with the evidence available to them, on issues like eternity and infinity especially.

Be that as it may and regardless of our modern view of eternity and infinity, I think Epicurus clearly knew what he was doing, even with the limits of his information, and he nevertheless thought it important to stake out a strong logical position against the arguments raised by the Platonists and other theists. That's why I am more convinced than ever that this "absence of pain" argument was exactly the same thing - it was a logical reply to the allegation that pleasure cannot be the goal because it has no limit.

I now see this as very much like the arguments on eternity and infinity. I personally continue to think that the Epicurean arguments on infinity and eternity remain compelling, but I agree that they aren't so important to many people today, because today, depending on our education, many of us don't think that gods created the universe or rule over us every day. That's why I think the path forward is not to get caught up in the logical arguments that were necessary to defeat Plato, except in those moments when we choose to engage in logical fencing and we choose to respond to Plato. If and when we are confronted with a Platonist asserting that pleasure is not the goal because Pleasure has no limit, we can answer: "the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain." Full stop - we have no need to take that argument any further into unsustainable discussions of "tranquility" or "painlessness is the ultimate pleasure" that contravene common sense definitions of pleasure and pain in ordinary human experience.

And to conclude, I don't think there's any evidence that Epicurus himself took those arguments any further to the extremes argued today. Epicurus uses the argument in the letter to

Menoceus and in the Principle Doctrines, but the rest of the textual record shows that Epicurus was writing and teaching on practical ways to pursue pleasurable living as non-philosophers understand that goal. That's the reason that Epicurus said so many other good things about ordinary pleasure that appear contradictory to the stoic interpretation of Pleasure, and that's why Diogenes Laertius recorded that Epicurus endorsed both pleasures of "action" and of "rest." These views weren't contradictory to him because he kept the normal definitions always in view, and he was discussing "limit of pleasure" only for the specific purpose of addressing and refuting the Platonic argument. The best interpretation that gives effect to ALL of what Epicurus is recorded to have said is that Epicurus was both a logical fencer AND a practical ethicist at the same time - and that's what we have to be too in order to understand him.

I am confident that Epicurus would say that if it takes a degree in philosophy to make common sense out of what he taught, then he failed miserably in his teaching career. I think the opposite is the case, however. I think it takes a degree in philosophy to twist Epicurean teaching into something that ordinary people can't recognize, and it's time to throw that counter-intuitive interpretation out the window.