

"Absence of Pain" In Cicero's "On Ends"

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2016 at 8:16 AM

[Cassius Amicus](#)

[11 hrs](#)

In one of the nearby threads there is an ongoing discussion of "absence of pain." Thanks to ES I was recently rereading Cicero's On Ends, and there is a passage there that those interested in this topic ought to know about. In this criticism of Epicurus by Cicero I think we can see that there is more going on than what meets the eye when people pull out a line that is translated as "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul" and elevate it to imply that the ordinary definition of pleasure has been eradicated. Had this been true, Cicero could not have written the following (note particularly ****as he in fact does****):

Cicero: "Had Epicurus cleared up the meaning of pleasure, he would not have fallen into such confusion. Either he would have upheld pleasure in the same sense as Aristippus, that is, an agreeable and delightful excitation of the sense, which is what even dumb cattle, if they could speak, would call pleasure; or, if he preferred to use an idiom of his own, instead of speaking the language of the Danaans one and all, men of Mycenae, Scions of Athens, and the rest of the Greeks invoked in these anapaests, he might have confined the name of pleasure to this state of freedom from pain, and despised pleasure as Aristippus understands it; or else, if he approved of both sorts of pleasure, as in fact he does, then he ought to combine together pleasure and absence of pain, and profess two ultimate Goods. Many distinguished philosophers have as a matter of fact thus interpreted the ultimate good as composite. For instance, Aristotle combined the exercise of virtue with well-being lasting throughout a complete lifetime; Callipho united pleasure with moral worth; Diodorus to moral worth added freedom from pain. Epicurus would have followed their example, had he coupled the view we are now discussing, which as it is belongs to Hieronymus, with the old doctrine of Aristippus. For there is a real difference of opinion between them, and accordingly each sets up his own separate End; and as both speak unimpeachable Greek, Aristippus, who calls pleasure the Chief Good, does not count absence of pain as pleasure, while Hieronymus, who makes the Chief Good absence of pain, never employs the name pleasure to denote this negation of pain, and in fact does not reckon pleasure among things desirable at all."

< ----->

Whether or not you agree with my "full cup" argument as presented on my newepicurean.com page, it is clear from this passage that Cicero understood Epicurus to have embraced pleasure as ordinarily understood by all men, including Aristippus. It's a very important point also to see that Epicurus had rejected the position of Hieronymus, who according to Cicero had in fact erected "absence of pain" as the goal and specifically rejected ordinary pleasure in so doing.

This passage shows that Epicurus would have been fully aware of this different arguments, and he clearly rejected the archtypical "absence of pain" argument, or Cicero would have explained how Epicurus and Hieronymus were the same.

So while we have to make an educated guess at the truth, in the absence of Epicurus' own words explaining this, whatever theory we follow cannot eject "ordinary pleasure" from the good / end of life, or else we end up embracing Hieronymus, who Epicurus rejected.

Personally, I think the key to unlocking this is to realize that Epicurus was dealing with an existing battlefield of ideas that included not only Hieronymus and Aristippus but Plato and others who employed the "limits" argument to argue that pleasure could not be the goal of life as it (in their view) has no limit. In order to meet this argument, Epicurus had to show that pleasure **does** have a limit, so he pointed out that the pleasures of life cannot be increased beyond our capacity to experience them, and our capacity to experience more pleasure is gone when we fill our experience with pleasure and succeed in ejecting all pain from our experience. There's nothing extraordinary about this state of pure pleasure that results - no new or unusual type of pleasure is involved - but being able to identify this theoretical state as possible essential for meeting the Platonic argument that the highest good must have a limit. {Note: In Epicurean theory this state is not only possible, but actual -- at least for "gods." One way of stating our goal in life is that we work toward the goal of becoming "gods among men."}

It seems to me that is why the "absence of pain" passage is there, and this also explains the similar reference that we have no need of [further] pleasure when all pain has been eliminated.

But I readily confess that the letter to Menoeceus can appear to us to be confusing. But I also suggest that the letter as written was **not** confusing to Menoeceus, because any student of Epicurus in 300 BC would have been fully familiar with the existing anti-pleasure majority position. Any educated Epicurean reading the letter would instantly have understood it as a complete refutation of the anti-pleasure/pain position, and an explanation of why the other philosophers were wrong. Our disability is that we no longer have the instant recognition of the anti-pleasure arguments. But that is something that those of us in this group and elsewhere who support Epicurean philosophy can work to remedy. 😊

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Comments

ES

ES "The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which directly affects our physical being with a delightful feeling,—a positively agreeable perception of the senses; on the contrary, the greatest pleasure according to us is that which is experienced as a result of the complete removal of pain. When we are released from pain, the mere sensation of complete emancipation and relief from uneasiness is in itself a source of gratification. But everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain). Therefore the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure. For example,

when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of uneasiness brings a resultant pleasure in its train. So generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place. Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain. But complete absence of pain Epicurus considers to be the limit and highest point of pleasure; beyond this point pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree."

-Torquatus

Like · Reply · 11 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Yes, that's the passage in issue. No doubt it was written by Epicurus for an important purpose, but that purpose could not reasonably have been to upend and invert everything else he had previously taught about pleasure. Just like a contract in a court of law, or interpretation of a statute, if there is a way to harmonize the totality to give effect to every provision of what is written, that is the way to the preferred conclusion - at least as long as we think that the writer was a consistent thinker!

Like · Reply · 2 · 11 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus And that is exactly what Cicero, lawyer that he is, refuses to do - which is the technique of a lawyer seeking victory over his opponent, not someone who is trying to harmonize words that may seem to conflict, but do not in fact conflict when read in a certain way.

Like · Reply · 2 · 11 hrs

ES

ES So are you arguing that the pleasure in which Epicurus promoted was something more or different than absence of emotional and physical pain? If so how is pleasure different and why is it important and can you show me textual evidence please.

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs · Edited

EB

EB Pleasure is not the absence of pain. However, absence of pain is the highest limit of pleasure.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

EB

EB In my understanding of Epicurus

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

ES

ES I'm sorry that just doesn't make sense to me.

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

ES

ES I'd also like to point out that pleasure as I understand Epicurus is predominantly absence of

EMOTIONAL Pain. It's apparent that tetrpharmakon is about easing all forms of anxiety-gods, death, sustenance and pain

Like · Reply · 10 hrs · Edited

EB

EB I meant that there are different forms of pleasure. To say pleasure is the absence of pain would mean there aren't other forms of pleasure that aren't the absence of pain, which would be false. The distinguishing characteristic of pleasure as an absence of pain is that it doesn't get better than that.

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus I agree with this statement largely, but the "it" in "it doesn't get any better than that" still leaves a little wiggle room for ambiguity."

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

ES

ES Right, but I'd like to see where Epicurus defines it as such

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

ES

ES I think I have far weightier evidence

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

EB

EB When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

EB

EB " By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

ES

ES Yes and even more that it is sober reasoning that BANISHES beliefs that cause anxiety !

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

ES

ES What are those false beliefs? Superstitions, religion, Malevolent and intervening gods, that life and basic goods are hard to procure and that pain is difficult to bear.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs · Edited

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus I think this is well stated EB: "I meant that there are different forms of pleasure.

To say pleasure is the absence of pain would mean there aren't other forms of pleasure that aren't the absence of pain, which would be false." Even in philosophy classes the "replenishment theory is acknowledged to be incomplete. Were we in pain from not smelling a rose before we smelled the rose? Was that smelling not a substantive pleasure? Yes, removal of pain is pleasurable, and provides space for pleasure as we ordinarily understand all its mental and physical variations, to fill in. But just like matter and void are opposites with real properties of their own, pleasure has a real existence with real positive properties, and these are not described by saying "absence of pain" any more than matter is sufficiently described as "absence of void."

Also, Eric, while mental pleasures and pains are held to be more intense than physical ones, I think there is no reason to think that Epicurus was focused on one at the expense of the other

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Eric what is a positive description of what you think is being described as "absence of pain." in this case, simply saying "that's pleasure" would be thought by most people (in my view) to be playing a word game, so what positive substantive definition would you give of that experience?

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

ES

ES I'm not disagreeing that pleasure is varied and positive. I'm just arguing that Epicurus defined it as an absence of emotional pain. I'd like to see textual evidence that Epicurus meant something more than what he said

Like · Reply · 10 hrs

IV

IV Menoecus 131:

"By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."

Both the body and mind need to be pain-free for there to be a total lack of pain. If either one is in pain, the absence isn't complete.

Like · Reply · 1 · 7 hrs

EP

EP Cassius, Ilkka, Hiram and friends, Epicurus is so clear to understand what he is saying and means in Menoecus 131 : <<When we say that pleasure is the goal of life we mean ..."AND TO NOT" [=in greek he uses the word "μήτε"] ACHING THE BODY "AND TO NOT" DISTURBING THE SOUL>>. Where did the translators find the word "ABSENCE" ?? There is not such a meaning in the text "that pleasure, as the goal of life, is the absence of pain". This description of what is the GOAL, is not accurate in any way and at all.

The ancient greek text from Menoecus 131 Ὅταν οὖν λέγωμεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὡς τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ****μήτε**** ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα ****μήτε**** ταραττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν.

New greek : Όταν, λοιπόν, υποστηρίζουμε ότι ο σκοπός της ζωής είναι η ηδονή, δεν εννοούμε τις ηδονές των ασώτων και τις αισθησιακές απολαύσεις, όπως από άγνοια ορισμένοι νομίζουν, και επειδή διαφωνούν μαζί μας ή παρερμηνεύουν αυτά που λέμε, αλλά εννοούμε το να μη πονά το σώμα και να μην ταρασσεται η ψυχή.

And in english : Thus, when we say that the goal of life is pleasure, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal and sensual pleasures, such of an ignorance some think, and because they disagree with us or misinterpret what we say, but we mean and to not aching the body and not disturbing the soul.

=====

Epicurus uses two times the word “μήτε» «AND TO NOT». And he uses this negative conjunction of “μήτε» , because he wants to "conjunct" SIMILAR TERMS or SIMILAR SENTENCES. Since, it is similar "and to not" aching the BODY "and to not" disturbing THE SOUL. SOUL AND BODY is the similar issue. See Translation

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 6 hrs · Edited

EP

EP Yes, Epicurus tried to give a description what is "pleasure", because it is well known this word , as the goal of life, WAS, IS AND WILL BE misinterpreted and misunderstood TOTALLY. I am sorry but we realize Epicurus was forced to describe the BIG PIC... See More

EP's photo.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 5 hrs · Edited

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

EB

EB I believe part of the reason absence of pain was very important for Epicurus was that it set the limit to the good we called "pleasure." If pleasure was just some positive thing, then adding more pleasure would always be possible, but by saying pleasure is the absence of pain it implied that the limit exists. And during that time the great good was expected to have some limit.

Unlike · Reply · 2 · 10 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus “It is observed too that in his treatise On the Ethical End he writes in these terms : “I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form.”

- Diogenes Laertius, Book X

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs

ES

ES That's fine. I find that acceptable. We can say that Epicurus defined pleasure as an absence of emotional and physical pain and additive and positive experiences mitigated by hedonic calculus

Like · Reply · 1 · 10 hrs · Edited

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Well Eric here I think Ekshesh is focusing on a distinction that is very important. "Absence of ..." is not a substantive description of anything - it is a "limit" of something, but it is not a description of anything. So I cannot say that I agree that pleasure IS an "absence of pain" in any respect but in that of "measurement." Measurement of quantity or quality is of course significant, but it is far from a complete description of the thing being measured.

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus So in the end if someone is going to suggest that "pleasure" means something that we all experience ordinarily through our mind and senses, and that all of us recognize, then I would really like to know how that experience is to be defined. Because any description I can think of about a mental or physical state, even "wellbeing" is something I would say, well OK that is what everyone understands by pleasure and you are saying nothing new. It's only if someone could describe something totally out of the ordinary that we can't all immediately understand through experience that I would say would be cause for acknowledging that something unusual is being discussed.

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus And what really is at stake here, as I think many of us realize, is that stoicism and other philosophies are accused (rightly or wrongly) of seeking to suppress all emotion. And Epicurus is said to specifically have stated that the wise man feels emotion MORE deeply than others, not less, which is not tranquility in the stoic sense..

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

ES

ES The experience is defined by tranquility

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

ES

ES And I acquiesce that there are additive pleasures

Like · Reply · 9 hrs · Edited

ES

ES You would be in gross error to not understand that much of Epicurus is helping mankind be freed from anxieties

Like · Reply · 9 hrs · Edited

Hide 13 Replies

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Oh I completely agree with that! I do agree that banishing anxiety is one of the huge aspects of the philosophy which is made necessary by many reasons, not the least of which is false religion and other philosophies. We are totally agreed there!

Like · Reply · 2 · 9 hrs

ES

ES Cassius Amicus tranquility is the absence of mental pain

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

ES

ES If we agree there id be happy

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

ES

ES I just feel that both Stoics and Epicureans seem to dismiss or minimize this to detriment

Like · Reply · 9 hrs · Edited

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus ES I am not so sure of that 😊 Why do you believe it is so? Cannot an ocean be both powerful and calm at the same time?

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

ES

ES You're not sure that Epicurus has anxieties in mind in much of what he addresses???

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus While we are discussing let me emphasize that I do consider calmness to be desirable! I am just not sure of all of the implications when people use the word tranquility, as that sounds too much like getting hit with a tranquilizer dart for me! 😊

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

ES

ES No no I understand your concern...

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

ES

ES Epicurus again in his tetrapharmakon ****IS**** addressing anxieties and is aiming at peace of mind/tranquility/ataraxia

Like · Reply · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Yes I agree that relief from anxiety is a key goal, but I worry that relief from anxiety should never be read to be a complete statement of the goal, because I do believe life requires exertion to attain pleasure in the short time we are alive

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

ES

ES Fair enough. I believe my reformulation in an earlier point entails both our concerns

Like · Reply · 9 hrs · Edited

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Also while we are discussing this I need to emphasize that I acknowledge that there are many people in many situations for whom unloading mental anxieties is such an immense task that it seems like all that is needed, and I greatly sympathize and understand that - been there myself.

Like · Reply · 2 · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus Without necessarily tagging anyone as the problem (well ok, I will tag many religions, but just not call any philosopher's names) I just always want to be aware of the ongoing campaign against pleasure as something that is dirty and disreputable and against gods will. That is a huge issue that will not go away as long as we live, unfortunately.....

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

EB

EB I have 1 question though. If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain. If we have two people x and y. and both experience no physical pain nor trouble of the soul, but y indulges in sex, listens to pleasurable music, eats tasty food, is it a folly to claim Y's life is more pleasurable than x's?

Like · Reply · 1 · 9 hrs

IV

IV The absolute absence of pain cannot be more pain-free with additional pleasures. At that point the pleasures only vary. For example, person x will also eat food, and if it's nutritious it will be tasty.

Menoceus 130: "Plain fare gives as much pleasure...See More

Like · Reply · 2 · 6 hrs

EB

EB Happiness is a tricky word here though. One could experience much pain and still claim to have lived a happy life, according to the Stoics at least. Would that be a happy life for Epicurus?

Like · Reply · 44 mins

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus A good question and this gets to the purity arguments. An experience of pure pleasure once pure can only be varied, but is not variation desirable when it is possible without pain? I think the answer here is related to how we would judge living 10 days as a "god among men" vs living 100 days. Given the choice I think it is clear that we would prefer to live 100 days, but the reason is not necessarily that the 100 days was "more pleasurable" in EVERY respect. The reason for the preference has to be carefully considered.

Like · Reply · 2 · 9 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus This is an excellent question EB and I can't "remember that we have discussed it recently. I think I will tag some of our other regulars like Hiram Crespo and AR and IV and EP to be sure they see this on and have a chance to comment if they like. "I have 1 question though. If the limit of pleasure is the absence of pain. If we have two people x and y. and both experience no physical pain nor trouble of the soul, but y indulges in sex, listens to pleasurable music, eats tasty food, is it a folly to claim Y's life is more pleasurable than x's?"

Like · Reply · 2 · 9 hrs · Edited

RW

RW OK, if a neutral state is the absence of both pain and pleasure, and Epicurus denies the possibility of such a state, then the mere absence of pain is not sufficient for pleasure. There must be actual positive pleasure. But it is also true that pleasure must follow from removal of pain, because, again, there is no neutral state. I think this becomes clear when we look at how we actually go about removing pain - by eating, by drinking, having sex, etc., positive pleasures

all.

Like · Reply · 1 · 8 hrs · Edited

IV

IV Menoecus 128.

"He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life. For the end of all o...See More

Unlike · Reply · 3 · 7 hrs

RW

RW I guess what we are both saying is that absence of pain and presence of pleasure are not a dichotomy. They go hand in hand. So to say that one or the other or both are THE goal is rather unnecessary. They are just two ways of describing the same phenomenon.

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 6 hrs

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

AR

AR Another way to understand this, "limit of pleasure is the absence of pain" bit is to get back to particle physics.

Analogy.

Particles/void in motion through space in time colliding with the spatial surface of a sensor.

For the sake of simple arithmetic we'll assume the sensor surface is fixed at 100. 100 units of surface area.

At every point in time that surface is occupied, with different proportions of particles and/or void.

If at some instant of time that sensor surface has 40 units of void occupying its surface, then what remains for particles is 60. The maximum of particles is determined by subtracting the void.

Now substitute:

1. pleasure for particle
2. pain for void
3. sensor surface for sensory orifice

How do we make more sensory surface available for particles, when we cannot change the sensor surface area?

By removing the void. The void occupies surface area as much as particles occupy surface area. If we want to fill the surface with 70 particles, at an instant of time, then we must reduce the void to 30.

Now let us suppose that the sensor surface was receiving 65 particles/35 void, for a long time, and so the surface shape due to collision reaction has stabilized, and is not changing. Let me

repeat, the shape of the surface is not changing because it has been receiving collisions at the same rate for a long time. It sustains a shape that we can call the "65/35" shape.

Then suppose we suddenly decrease the flow rate to 55/45 and maintain that. How will the sensor respond?

The sensor surface will adjust its shape over some time, not suddenly, then it will assume a new shape. The span of time involved in that adjustment is a measure of the sensor's latency. The adjustment in shape over time, a measure of its reactivity at that rate.

Now suppose we smoothly increase the rate to 80/20. The shape of the surface of the sensor will once again adjust and settle on a new shape. A shape that we can associate to the new rate. The "80/20" shape.

In engineering terms we say that the sensor surface has a static response and a dynamic response. The static response depends on the rate and is revealed in its shape.

The dynamic response is revealed by the amount of latency involved in changing shape to accommodate a sudden change of rate. We call a sudden change of rate a pulse.

How else could we adjust the system? We can dampen the sensor, and then later undampen it.

Note that if we flow a rate of 99/1 we have a shape that can adjust up to 100/0 but not to more than that. In engineering we say the sensor has become saturated. It has reached its dynamic limit, and can only adjust down. Likewise if we flow a rate of 0/100 the shape can only adjust up, and not down.

Most sensors are most reactive, and most true to proportion in the middle of their range.

Unlike · Reply · 2 · 6 mins · Edited

EP

EP AR my friend, you left me astonished and speechless !

Can we assume that "the surface area" is our body and soul ?

And can we say it like this ? "when we say that pleasure is the goal, we mean that we feel it AS MUCH AS the pain is reducing ? Or we say it : "the more the pleasure we feel, so much more the pain is reducing" ? Did I understand correct this issue Alexander or not ?

Unlike · Reply · 1 · 13 mins

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus AR I agree that there is a good analogy here between pleasure/pain and the space relationship between bodies and void. However I suppose there are limits to the analogy in the same way that we see the trouble with saying that pleasure "is" the absence of pain - we are looking at pleasure and pain, and bodies and void, in only one respect, which I think is "quantity." Of course pleasure and pain and bodies and void (at least bodies) have many other qualities besides "quantity." Is that not the real problem we are running into, that "X is absence of Y" is in one respect only (quantity)? And that the stumbling block is that people are not recognizing that we are talking only in one respect, and not even attempting to give a full

overview of the topic?

When we say the word "orange" in the context of describing the fruit, we know what we are talking about because we know the orange-colored fruit that grows on trees. But if we did not know what that fruit was, the word "orange" would tell us about it only in respect to its color, and leave us totally in the dark as to its other qualities.

That's what we seem to be doing here. Epicurus is concerned about quantity and quality because the existing philosophical discussion about the goal of life requires that discussion (the goal is thought to be something that cannot be increased or purified). And the "X is absence of Y" or "we only need X when Y is present" is terminology that derives from that quantity/quality context, presuming that we understand that the pleasures and pains involved are real and have many other attributes BESIDES their quantity and quality.

Like · Reply · 2 mins

Cassius Amicus

Write a comment...