

More Thoughts On Removal of Pain And The Letter to Menoecus

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2019 at 9:27 AM

Charles posted this:

What's the Epicurean position on the immediate removal of pain, rather than the absence of it. I was thinking about how after my migraines pass, I get an immediate sensation of pleasure and happiness, not just because the pain is gone, but primarily of having the agency to experience just about anything without an intense throbbing pain from my temples to the back of my head. But it got me thinking, in the Letter to M, Epicurus states: "For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good." (Bailey)

Is there perhaps some mis-translation somewhere about the absence and/or removal of pain? The Cyril Bailey translation constantly switches back and forth on this issue.

Cassius' replies:

First comment is that I almost look forward to getting a bad cold or flu like I have now, because the health sensation of feeling better when it passes seems much better than the state before the flu started!

Second, the line you have quoted about pleasure being the standard is every bit as clear, if not more so, than the line about absence of pain. Plus, the line about pleasure as the standard is consistent with the start of On the Nature of Things, and consistent with every surviving fragment of text from Epicurus that we have EXCEPT (on the face of it) the statements in the letter to Menoecus about absence of pain. I am not competent to say that there is a mistranslation, although I suspect that too. Absent a mistranslation, it is necessary to reconcile the apparent conflict, and in my case I believe that the reconciliation comes by looking to PD3 for its inclusion of QUANTITY as a key component, and then comparing the discussion of quantity of pleasure with the argument in Plato's [Philebus](#) (and elsewhere) alleging that pleasure cannot be the good because it has no limit. So my preferred reconciliation is that there is no conflict, because the passages about absence of pain are limited to "quantity" (as in PD3) and not intended to conflict with the other clear statements about Pleasure as the good.

OR, you can follow the Cambridge/OKeefe position, and take the position that when Epicurus used the word "pleasure" he didn't mean what we ordinarily mean by "pleasure."

... Which I maintain is an absurd position, and reduces Epicurean philosophy to the realm of nonsense -- which is exactly where the neo-Stoics of the world want it to stay.

Charles here is another observation on your point. Pasted here is a side-by-side greek and english version of one of the key passages.

You will note that the phrase "by pleasure we mean" is added in as a presumably valid English translation, but in fact that is presuming the result of the entire question, because "be pleasure we mean" implies identity in every respect, and that would be a ridiculous contention. In PD3 the word "quantity" (sometimes translated "magnitude" appears, and this word provides a qualifier that indicates that the issue being discussed is one of measurement, and not identity in every respect. Your shoe or a loaf of bread could both equal a foot in length, but saying that they are both a foot tells you nothing about what you are measuring except their length. Why would Epicurus be concerned about pleasure and pain in terms of measurement? Because Plato in [Philebus](#) had explicitly argued that due to "measurement" issues pleasure cannot be the ultimate goal of life.

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Menoecus 131-132

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Ὅταν οὖν λέγῃμεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὡς
(Therefore) whenever → we say [that] pleasure [is] (the) end-goal → [we are] not [speaking] → of the [pleasures] of the profligate → and [those that lie] in enjoyment → → as

τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσι, ἀλλὰ τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν· οὐ
some ignorant and not like-minded or ill inclined (people) believe but (by pleasure we mean) → neither to feel pain in (our) body nor to be disturbed in (our) soul →

γὰρ πότοι καὶ κῶμοι συνεύροντες οὐδ' ἀπολαύσεις παίδων καὶ γυναικῶν οὐδ' ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσα φέρει πολυτελεὲς τράπεζα,
Because (neither) drinking binges and [ongoing] feasts → nor enjoyments of boys and women nor of fish and of those [other] things → that → (a) luxurious dining table [carries]

τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾶ βίον, ἀλλὰ νήφον λογισμὸς καὶ τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς καὶ τὰς δόξας ἐξελαύνων, ἐξ ὧν
[engender] the pleasurable → life but sober reasoning → → → that explores [the causes] of every choice and avoidance and → → drives out [false] [beliefs] because of which

πλείστος τὰς ψυχὰς καταλαμβάνει θόρυβος. 131-132
(the) greatest [disturbance seizes] the souls → →

Translation

Thus when we say that **pleasure** is the goal, we do not mean the pleasure of debauchery or sensuality, despite whatever the ignorant, disagreeable, or malignant people believe. By pleasure, we mean this: freedom from **pain** in the body and freedom from **turmoil** in the soul. For it is not continuous drinking and revelry, the **sexual** enjoyment of women and boys, or feasting upon fish and fancy cuisine which result in a happy life. Sober reasoning is what is needed, which decides every choice and avoidance and liberates us from the false beliefs which are the greatest source of anxiety.

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(or "quantity")

Ὁρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἢ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦτος ὑπεξάρσεις· ὅπου δ' ἂν τὸ ῥόμιμον ἐνῆ, καθ' ὅν ἂν χρόνον ἦ, οὐκ

(The) limit of magnitude of the pleasures (is) the (removal) of everything → painful → Wherever (there is) → → → pleasure → → → → however long it may be (present) →

ἔστι τὸ ἀλγῶν ἢ τὸ λυπούμενον ἢ τὸ συναμφοτέρον. B333

there is (no) → pain or → sadness or → both together