

PD20 - Commentary on PD 20

Post by "Don" of March 26, 2020 at 5:31 AM

Ἡ μὲν σὰρξ ἀπέλαβε τὰ πέρατα τῆς ἡδονῆς ἄπειρα καὶ ἄπειρος αὐτὴν χρόνος ἀρέσκοι ἄν. ἡ δὲ διάνοια τοῦ τῆς σαρκὸς τέλους καὶ πέρατος λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν καὶ τοὺς ὑπὲρ τοῦ αἰῶνος φόβους ἐκλύσασα τὸν παντελεῖ βίον παρεσκεύασεν, καὶ οὐθὲν ἔτι τοῦ ἀπείρου χρόνου προσεδεήθη· <οὐ> μὴν ἀλλ' οὔτε ἔφυγε τὴν ἡδονὴν οὔθ' ἠνίκα τὴν ἐξαγωγὴν ἐκ τοῦ ζῆν τὰ πράγματα παρεσκεύαζεν, ὡς ἐλλείπουσά τι τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου κατέστρεφεν.

Saint-Andre translation: The flesh assumes that the limits of joy are infinite, and that infinite joy can be produced only through infinite time. But the mind, reasoning out the goal and limits of the flesh and dissolving fears about eternity, produces a complete way of life and therefore has no need of infinite time; yet the mind does not flee from joy, nor when events cause it to exit from life does it look back as if it has missed any aspect of the best life.

Ἡ σὰρξ isn't just "the flesh." Liddell and Scott give the additional definition, citing the Vatican Sayings: II. "the flesh, as the seat of the affections and lusts, fleshly nature, "ἐν τῆ ς. ἡ ἡδονή" Epicur. Sent.18, cf. Sent.Vat. 33." So, Ἡ μὲν σὰρξ ἀπέλαβε τὰ πέρατα τῆς ἡδονῆς **ἄπειρα** can be translated as "Our 'fleshly nature' assumes as its due that the bounds of pleasure are **infinite (without bounds)**..." The flesh feels it is *due* infinite pleasures, and that **ἄπειρος** αὐτὴν χρόνος ἀρέσκοι ἄν. ... only **infinite** time will satisfy them...

ἡ δὲ **διάνοια** τοῦ τῆς σαρκὸς τέλους καὶ πέρατος λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν καὶ τοὺς ὑπὲρ τοῦ αἰῶνος φόβους ἐκλύσασα τὸν παντελεῖ βίον παρεσκεύασεν Here we find the part preceded by δὲ so this part will contrast with the first part's μὲν section. Contrasting with σὰρξ/σαρκὸς, **διάνοια** is intelligence, understanding. τοῦ τῆς σαρκὸς τέλους καὶ πέρατος are the fleshly nature's goals (τέλους) and boundaries/limits (πέρατος, the word we saw in the first sentence). Nussbaum's Therapy of Desire translates this passage as "Reason... by driving out the fear of eternity (τοῦ αἰῶνος φόβους), makes life complete." "Life complete" is conveyed by τὸν παντελεῖ βίον. I contend that this is one of the more important phrases in the original Greek. This is the kind of life that is produced by following the Epicurean path. Again, we have to delve into Epicurus' words to really appreciate what he's saying. Παντελεῖ derives from παν "all, every" + τέλος "goal, end" but not just any goal or end, the ultimate, fully-accomplished end of something, its fully-realized purpose. So, Epicurus is calling us to a life where he believes we can find that every goal is accomplished, every purpose fulfilled IF we understand the limits of pleasure and desire. That will provide us with τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου "the best life" of all the possible ways of living. Pleasure remains pleasure, but, if we were ruled entirely by our σὰρξ we would feel we deserve - indeed, are due! - infinite pleasure which entails the requirement that we need infinite time and must therefore see death as an evil. However, our διάνοια allows us to make choices and rejections based on a goal of leading both the complete and the best life

right here and right now.

Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2020 at 8:46 AM

Eugenios I think when this passage is discussed comments are often made to the effect that this passage means that a life of pleasure which is within reach of us is not inferior (at least, not necessarily inferior) to a life in which time is unlimited.

I think also this is one of those occasions when we have to be very careful about the meaning of the word "limit."

So when you say this I think you are precisely correct:

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

Pleasure remains pleasure, but, if we were ruled entirely by our $\sigma\rho\xi$ we would feel we deserve - indeed, are due! - infinite pleasure which entails the requirement that we need infinite time and must therefore see death as an evil.

But in this next sentence I think some people are going to think we are avoiding the real issue, and interpret it in ways that would vary widely (what is the BEST life?) and so additional clarity would be desirable.

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

However, our $\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu\omicron\iota\alpha$ allows us to make choices and rejections based on a goal of leading both the complete and the best life right here and right now.

What would you say to the question:

"Ok, I understand that you are telling me that I don't need to live an infinite time to live the best life. What are you telling me about how much time DO I need, and how am I to spend that time in order to reach that best life?"

Post by “Don” of March 26, 2020 at 9:32 AM

Excellent points and questions! These kinds of discussions are why I think it's so important to not only debate different translations but how to interpret the original language as well. This is just a first response. I'm not addressing directly yet your "How much time DO I need?" but that's important as well. The only thing on that which comes to mind is the beginning of the letter to Menoikos: *Let no one put off the love and practice of wisdom [note] when young, nor grow tired of it when old.* That doesn't address duration but only "Don't waste it while you have it!" I'll cogitate some more on this one.

To address the "best life," your question made me curious if the phrases ἀρίστου βίου "the best life" and παντελεῖ βίον "the complete life" show up anywhere else in the works, essentially asking Epicurus to define his terms (although he may dislike that characterisation).

Interestingly, as far as I can tell, those two phrases only occur as phrases in PD 20. However, παντελεῖ shows up one more time in the next PD:

PD 21: Ὁ τὰ πέρατα τοῦ βίου κατειδῶς οἶδεν ὡς εὐπόριστόν ἐστι τὸ <τὸ> ἀλγοῦν κατ' ἔνδειαν ἐξαιροῦν καὶ τὸ τὸν ὅλον βίον παντελεῖ καθιστάν· ὥστε οὐδὲν προσδεῖται πραγμάτων ἀγῶνας κεκτημένων. Hicks translation: He who understands the limits of life knows how easy it is to procure enough to remove the pain of want and make **the whole of life complete and perfect**. Hence he has no longer any need of things which are not to be won save by conflict and struggle.

Here we also again find the "limits of life" (τὰ πέρατα τοῦ βίου) as well as "**the whole of life complete and perfect**" (τὸ τὸν ὅλον βίον παντελεῖ). So, from this, I interpret the "complete life" to be described by Epicurus as one in which one "has no longer any need of things which are not to be won save by conflict and struggle." One is maximizing pleasure and minimizing conflict and struggle. That's the best life. And we achieve it through applying the Canon.

Post by "Cassius" of March 26, 2020 at 9:41 AM

I don't mean my question to be a trick one, so I will go ahead and say that I think that the question "What is the best life?" may not be a valid question, in that the term "best life" is probably like the term "the good" in at least several respects:

(1) that whatever conceptual definition we give to it is inherently going to fall short of describing reality, just like math doesn't give a full description of reality, for which reason Epicurus was so suspicious of abstract logic,

and

(2) If we presume (we should not presume, this needs to be nailed down) that feeling (including Pleasure) is, at least within limits natural to a species, something that is inherently subjective, then "the best life" (which surely in Epicurean terms is also defined in terms of pleasure) is also going to be something that Epicurus would have viewed as inherently subjective.

So the term "best life" is going to have lots of aspects to consider before it can even be clearly discussed.

Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2020 at 9:45 AM

I will also go ahead and give my tentative answer to "how much time do we need to live the best life?"

Consistent with my comments in the last post I don't think that this question as a definite "objective" answer either. I do not think that Nature has established an set of definitions to which we can look for the "best life," but rather given Pleasure/feeling as a guide to do the best with which each individual is able to do.

I think it is pretty clear that it is more desirable *in general* to live a longer pleasurable life than a shorter pleasurable life, but since pleasure is inherently subjective (again, there is that issue) then there is no "objective" measure of "how much time do we need to live so that our life is complete."

So my general framework is to question whether these "matter of fact questions" such as "What is the best life?" " What is the complete life?" What is "the good?" would be something in which Epicurus would engage discussion without first laying the groundwork as to the limits of the usefulness of the discussion.

Post by “Don” of March 26, 2020 at 9:55 AM

OH, I see where you're going. You're going way deeper than I was!

Honestly, I interpreted "the best life (possible)" as simply an Epicurean one, one that applies the philosophy taught by Epicurus. That's the way to achieve "the best" of possible ways of living a human life.

Post by “Cassius” of March 26, 2020 at 10:13 AM

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

Honestly, I interpreted "the best life (possible)" as simply an Epicurean one, one that applies the philosophy taught by Epicurus. That's the way to achieve "the best" of possible ways of living a human life.

Yes, no doubt that's the first part of the answer, then comes the harder part! 😊