

Epicurean Ethics And the Coronavirus Episode - A Starting Point

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2020 at 8:02 AM

33 On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

It is helpful to ethical terms. Ethics in "On

Full text here: <https://archive.org/details/defini...age/36/mode/2up>

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2020 at 10:29 AM

Followup crossposting:

Elli:

"Duty or obligations" in certain emergencies... and that's how with these two words, as used by Torquatus, you can see some of the shades with some of the differences among the Romans and Hellenes 😊

Of course, I fully trust the Roman Torquatus when he defends our philosophy to Cicero, and on what he said, but if he would be alive, I would like to ask him this : Why dear epicurean friend Torquatus to not use words such as "personal responsibility" which is extending to "social responsibility" in certain emergencies?

Words such as duty and obligation do not point out so much our power to do a constant measurement while we observe and examine the phenomena as they are proceeding and maybe the usage of such kind of words will lead us to a kind of necessity.

Cassius:

Elli I I wish we had more translations of On Ends to go by other than Rackham. I see that Rackham himself in another edition avoided the word "emergencies" and went with "circumstances."

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In the point you raise I see the Latin is "officiis debitis" and the "officiis" is generally translated as "duties" (His De "Officiis" is generally translated "On Duty"). But I wonder if we really have the full sense of it as he intended, or just the stoicized oversimplification. In Cicero's own case it might be natural to suspect that "office" as in governmental office might be the more natural implication. And of course we have this through Cicero so it's hard to say whether his Epicurean contemporaries would have used that term or not. Another thought: I have a lot more trouble with "duty" than I do with "obligations." Though they are pretty close, at least the way we use them today "obligations" alone seems a little more oriented toward things that result from our own actions, while "duty" still has the stoicized sense of obligations to god or morality or to other aspects of "fate" which cross over a line toward religion.

Elli:

Maybe Torquatus, addressed to Cicero says : The so-called by you (i.e. the platonists and stoics) such as duty or obligations. And here, maybe, Torquatus did a kind of compromise and used "the nice to ears" words for being more understandable to Cicero. Because Cicero does not understand the "swerve", the usage of the Canon, and its criteria of truth. For Cicero virtue was the goal and at the same time, this was his blindness to not understand what Epicurus with his philosophy proclaims. 😊

Cassius:

Yes I agree Elli. The foundation of the analysis here is that in times when nothing prevents us from being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But when the times DO prevent us from being able to do what we like best, then we will have to defer or even repudiate certain pleasures while we embrace things that we find painful, always in the service of looking to the full and complete ramifications of our choices. And that means not just long range vs short range (the time question) but also what we value the most or the best, which is independent of time, as in the example of where we will sometimes give our life for a friend. It's this last part that people seem to struggle with, because they infer that we are talking about "sensual-bodily" pleasures alone, while Epicurus specifically held that mental pleasures, which come in a boundless variety of mental / emotional forms (such as our pleasures of friendship for which we may even give our own life as per the example) are frequently more significant than bodily ones..

So the Epicurean analysis is not primarily some Stoic-like (or dare I say "British like") "grin and bear it" or "keep a stiff upper lip," but a full analysis of the entire situation. And the full analysis is performed and geared toward taking whatever ****action**** is required in pursuit of the ultimate end, which is not the suppression of emotion and sensation, but the best "enjoyment" or emotion and all other sensations, whether bodily or mental during whatever time is available to us. Sometimes "grinning and bearing" or "keeping that stiff upper lip" will be helpful toward that goal, and sometime it will be positively the worst thing you can do. Only someone who rejects the Epicurean view of the universe is going to get confused and think that the choice in that regard is ***always*** the same.

Elli:

I would like to add again in our discussion, this excerpt from the book of Dimitris Liantinis entitled "Stoa & Rome".

The three sections of the Stoa is Physics, Logic, and Ethics. But the core of their system is the moral act. The stoic basically is the team member, the part of the organization, the man of indoctrination. The moral imperative is his main instrument: the currency of the transactions. For this reason, the most important concept-word, created by the Stoa, is the word DUTY and to its roman extension is OFFICIUM.

The obligation (kathekon=duty) to act for this reason, and not otherwise, for this reason, is the big light that illuminates all the shadows and the colonnades of the Stoa. It appears immediately and remotely that the two main features of the stoicism : it is a system and that is moral: and it denounced as an invention rather than PURELY Greek.

For the Stoics, apathy means more than temper or neutrality or amethexia. Apathy means stopping to have passions because you uproot them. You decapitate their animal gushing and then you burn the root of the wound, as Iolaus burned heads of Lernean Hydra. And at this point, the Stoa is from classical ethics of Greeks, as the NEARBY is from the DISTANT. Since the Greeks built their Cosmotheosis and culture on their passions and then educated them with their prudence. All the evidence is on their Attic tragedy.

Because...what is the man without his passions? Without his passions, man is like a lame runner and an athlete discobolus without hands. It is like Cicero without tongue, a sailor without the sea, and a eunuch stallion. Our passions rouse us for the great things of the creation. For create the doll as a woman and the bridge as a passage, and the monk as Papaflessas (*)...]

(*) Papaflessas was a monk who fought in the greek revolution of 1821 against the Ottoman empire.

Post by “Don” of April 29, 2020 at 5:49 PM

One thing I think we have to keep in mind when taking about Cicero is that *On Ends* doesn't offer us a transcription of an actual Epicurean speaking to Cicero. As I understand it, Cicero is using "Torquatus" as a character in his work to explain Epicureanism. I have no doubt Cicero was generally accurate (he had living Epicureans to call "foul!" if he went too astray) but I'm also sure he was very deliberate in his word choices for the Epicurean's "contribution" to the "conversation." Cicero was no fan of Epicureanism and if he could provide a shade of meaning he preferred to steer the interpretation his way, I have no doubt he did. So, there's that problem of seeing Epicureanism "through a glass darkly" or at least through Cicero's "glasses."

Post by “Cassius” of April 29, 2020 at 6:11 PM

Yes indeed. The commentators I have seen discuss it presume that Cicero largely transcribed an existing Epicurean text, but that's very speculative, and even if he did transcribe one, there's no doubt (in my mind anyway) that he did so selectively.