

Can an octopus be an Epicurean?

Post by “Don” of July 13, 2020 at 5:05 PM

Now that I have your attention with that provocative title 😊 I wanted to share this Ted-ED video about the feeling of pain: [How do animals experience pain](#).

I found it fascinating, but especially its description of nociception vs the cognitive feeling of pain. And some animals appear to be making decisions about pain (as in the octopus both protecting an injured limb but also deciding to use it to catch prey).

And I don't think octopuses can be Epicureans... Or do I? 🤔

Enjoy.

Post by “Cassius” of July 13, 2020 at 5:43 PM

I think this is a very interesting topic. I am firmly in the camp that "intelligent life" is a sliding scale and that the issue of "can they feel pain" goes a long way down from humans (and UP to the Epicurean "gods" in the intermundia) 😊

More seriously now, this is where I think the ultimate path is in the direction of not putting those who are having pain into hard vertical categories (human, vertebrate, etc) but defining more "horizontally" the issue of "whose" pain we should consider and how we consider it. That's pretty much we do in real life now, and we probably ought to give a lot more thought to articulating it clearly so we can come to terms with it.

My own personal examples I think about are the animal shelters, the nursing homes, etc, that I know are in my own "backyard." If I focused on that as much as I might be tempted to then I would never have a life of my own, so I know that overindulgence in "saving the world" simply can't work. Given the difference between what I'd like to do vs what I "can" do (even if i tried) it makes sense to openly examine the limits and deal with them consciously, rather than simply shutting them out of our mind as if they are too terrible to contemplate.

Post by “SamJ” of July 13, 2020 at 10:58 PM

That's a fascinating video Don. Whilst slightly away from the Octups topic it reminded me of an interview about Dr Paul Brand. It should be noted he was a Christian but firstly he was a Doctor who spent his life researching pain, particularly those with Leprosy. There's a great interview on him in LA Times from years ago but his thoughts and views on pain are really interesting in how they align with his beliefs but also how i think that they too transcend Epicurean thought.

In the article he mentions briefly about how a Scientist alters a Dog's perception of pain and he notes how Humans can adjust their views on pain too.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 14, 2020 at 1:27 AM

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xp...8943-story.html>

Excellent and pertinent article SamJ!

Post by “Don” of July 14, 2020 at 5:56 AM

[Godfrey](#) : Thanks for finding that article! Interesting reading! I found these pages very reminiscent of Epicureanism:

Quote

More physical activity (to build endurance); prayer or meditation (which calms the body and reduces pain); gratitude (an antidote to the pain-intensifying effects of anger and resentment); and a network of friends and family. “The best single thing I can do to prepare for pain is surround myself with a loving community who will stand by me when tragedy strikes,” Brand notes. He also says Americans need to embrace pain as a friend: “We silence pain when we should be straining our ears to hear it; we eat too fast and too much and take a seltzer; we work too long and too hard and take a tranquilizer. “Perhaps because I have had to repair so many physical problems caused by overindulgence, I take a long-term view of pleasure. [For example], gluttony may give short-term pleasure, [but] it sows the seed for future disease and pain. Hard work and exercise, which may seem like pain in the short term, paradoxically lead to pleasure in the longer term.”

I liked his characterization of pain and pleasure working together and seeing value in pain. Epicurus, too, while obviously valuing pleasure, seemed to see pain as a valuable stop signal and our awareness of it is part of our choice/avoidance process.

i found the latter paragraph reminding me of PD 10.

On the other hand, I didn't agree with this:

Quote

"In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed-- but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they have brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? "The cuckoo clock."

This is the same fallacy of people saying Van Gogh was a tortured soul but how fortunate we are to have his artwork. No. If Van Gogh could have been treated and lived a pleasurable life free from mental illness, we could do without the sunflowers and starry nights. And Switzerland had not exactly had 500 years of democracy and peace. Napoleon had control of the Helvetic Republic in the 1800s, there have been internal conflict, but this Wikipedia excerpt makes me think the Swiss might be doing okay:

Quote

The sovereign state is one of the most developed countries in the world, with the highest nominal wealth per adult and the eighth-highest per capita gross domestic product. It ranks at or near the top in several international metrics, including economic competitiveness and human development. Zürich, Geneva and Basel have been ranked among the top ten cities in the world in terms of quality of life, with Zürich ranked second globally. In 2019, IMD placed Switzerland first in attracting skilled workers. World Economic Forum ranks it the 5th most competitive country globally.

And the Swiss have done okay in the arts and humanities, too, with Giacometti, Herman Jesse, etc., etc. And, oh yeah, they also gave us the Red Cross.

Sorry, my Swiss ancestry is showing a little in that last part there 😊

Post by "Don" of July 14, 2020 at 8:14 AM

For me, it's important to remember that when Epicurus talked about freedom from pain, he couldn't have been talking about ridding oneself of nociception. The feeling/sensation of pain, as the video and Paul Brand article show, is indisputably beneficial in keeping us safe and healthy. It seems to me that Epicurus had to be talking about **our reaction** to nociception. Aponia carried the connotation of not just freedom from "pain" but freedom from struggle, toil, trouble, labor. The Tetrapharmakos's last line stated that *The Terrible* (το δεινον "to deinson" (same as the dino- in dinosaur "terrible lizard"), referring to Pain, can be "easily" endured. So, we will still feel Pain (nociception) but we can make a conscious effort to endure it (our reaction to that pain). We need not struggle against it or dwell on it. "Endure" strikes me as "getting through" something. You don't stay with something. You get through it and know it will pass.

Post by "Cassius" of July 14, 2020 at 9:40 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

For me, it's important to remember that when Epicurus talked about freedom from pain, he couldn't have been talking about ridding oneself of nociception.

So that we eliminate all chance of sounding like a Stoic, I would probably say "*ridding oneself of the FACULTY of nociception...*"

In other words we do want to reduce to the extent possible the particular instances of nociception that are unavoidable or that we choose to accept, but at the same time we also acknowledge the value and preserve the faculty of being able to sense pain when it occurs. The diabetic who cannot feel pain in his feet will burn them walking on hot surfaces, so the faculty of pain is valuable, just as Don is saying.

No doubt there is also a lot to be said for pain-killers that numb physical pain when it cannot be avoided, but the hazards of those are well known and obvious - much like the hazards of adopting stoicism.

At least the patient in pain who takes painkillers does not harangue us that taking the painkillers is virtuous!

Post by "Godfrey" of July 14, 2020 at 11:48 AM

In my Zen days I was quite aware of the difference between "pain" and "suffering" as I was dealing with back pain. There was the sensation in the nerves, sometimes quite intense, (pain) and the cringing in anticipation of that pain or the tensing up in response to the pain (suffering). The "suffering" made the "pain" much greater; reducing the "suffering" helped in finding physical relaxation which in turn reduced the pain.

Regarding the idea in the article that we need to embrace pain as a friend: on the more subtle end of the scale, at least for myself, the tendency is to be totally ignorant of pain. I think this is what is mis-perceived as the mythical "neutral zone." Being aware of this low grade pain is, to me, a key skill for an Epicurean in that it can prevent much future, greater pain. You could even call it a life hack if you are so inclined.

Post by “Don” of July 14, 2020 at 12:59 PM

Pain (nociception) vs suffering! That's the distinction I was trying to get at! Thanks, [Godfrey!](#)

