

"All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation" - Comparison of Translations

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2021 at 9:32 AM

Today I was looking at the graphic I did which lists four key aspects of Epicurean thought, and I prepared this to focus on alternate translations of the third of the points:

Epicurus' Statement on Good And Evil From The Letter To Menoeceus:

Bailey: "...For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation."

Yonge: "...Since all good and evil is in sensation, and since death is only the privation of sensation."

Hicks: "...for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience."

DeWitt: "...Because all good and evil lies in consciousness, and death is the loss of consciousness."

Epicurism.info: "All things good and bad are experienced through sensation, but sensation ceases at death."

Inwood – Gerson: "For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience."



Posted at [FB](#) with this discussion starter:

Here is a significant passage from the Letter to Menoeceus which mentions "good" and "evil." Some might choose to read this as saying simply that we cannot recognize good and evil

without our senses, but others will say that Epicurus went further, and taught that independent standards of good and evil do not exist in the universe apart from our sensation of them. Here are six translations of this passage into English to think about and consider his wording:

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2021 at 11:44 AM

Quote

Train yourself to hold that [death is nothing to us](#), because good and evil consist in sensation, and death is the removal of sensation. συνέθιζε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν ἐν αἰσθήσει· στέρησις [deprivation] δὲ ἐστὶν αἰσθήσεως ὁ θάνατος.

I see anytime that ἀγαθὸν and κακὸν occur, you should be able to substitute pleasure and pain, respectively. Try that and see how that changes the tenor of the translations.

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2021 at 2:57 PM

Yes Don if those were substituted I do think the modern interpretation of that would change a lot, because I don't think today we consider good/evil synonymous with pleasure/pain at all. But I also feel sure that Epicurus understood that there was a dramatic issue involved in choosing between the two sets of words, so we need to take a position on whether the "wider" meaning (referring to good and evil) is more true to what Epicurus said, or whether it's the more narrow reference to pleasure and pain. I don't think we today - or they back then - would have much issue in saying that pleasure and pain end with the end of sensation at death, but "good" and "evil" are much bigger questions.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2021 at 3:33 PM

I always go back to the Tetrpharmakos where τᾶγαθον t'agathon "the good" is easily obtained and τὸ δεινὸν to deinon "the terrible" is easily endured. I firmly believe both of those are supposed to denote pleasure and pain, respectively, in those four lines. Those words taken in

the context of the [Principal Doctrines](#) leads me to believe that good/evil, agathon/kakon (or deinon) refer to pleasure and pain in the Letter and elsewhere. Every pleasure is a good, every pain is an evil.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2021 at 7:17 PM

I've been thinking some more about this. Without any sort of "Platonic" ideal form of "good" or "evil" the only way to judge good or bad is if it elicits pleasure or pain. That is why I believe Epicurus can say pleasure is *the* good. There's no other yardstick - literally, canon - to measure "the good."

Post by “Cassius” of February 17, 2021 at 9:13 PM

Yes on your posts 4 and 5. I think your conclusion is absolutely correct as to Epicurus, and I suspect we agree on what I am about to say as to the manner of presentation:

Until someone sees the Epicurean conclusion that you just stated, it isn't appropriate to collapse the reasoning process too fast.

Just like in the Epicurus quote about "the meaning of good" and walking around endlessly discussing it, Epicurus would have been faced with opposing schools constantly talking about "the good." So I would presume Epicurus was often doing exactly what we are doing now, and pointing out that there is no basis for good except pleasure and no basis for evil except pain. In order to explain the point, however, it is necessary to use the terminology of both schools, and refer to platonic good and evil. So I would expect that there is good reason to translate them as the translators are doing. (Using good and evil).

And that is why I continually point to Epicurus using "logical" arguments at times, even though he is pointing to feeling as the only reason to apply logic (or to do anything else). Just like Epicurus would have had to do with his own students, we have to acknowledge and use the terminology and approach of both schools if we are ever going to clearly show how they are different.

Post by “Don” of February 17, 2021 at 9:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So I would expect that there is good reason to translate them as the translators are doing. (Using good and evil).

The translators are just taking the *literal* route:

αγαθός = good, literally [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...:entry=a\)gago/s](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...:entry=a)gago/s)

κακός = bad, literally <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry%3Dkako%2Fs>

Most translators - academically speaking - especially older ones - appear uncomfortable with the word "pleasure" and most likely took the opportunity to translate agathos and kakos literally instead of delving deeper into what Epicurus was trying to convey.

Post by "Bryan" of February 17, 2021 at 11:56 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Without any sort of "Platonic" ideal form of "good" or "evil" the only way to judge good or bad is if it elicits pleasure or pain.

And for this reason indeed there is a general equivalency in our school between the use of ἀγαθόν as pleasure and κακόν as pain, even though it seems we cannot press for a total equivalency because of instances such as "οὐδεμία Ἡδονὴ καθ' ἑαυτὸ κακόν (ΚΔ8) no Pleasure by itself is bad" Here we have to admit difficulty taking κακόν as an exact equivalent to pain, as it requires the conceptual framing of "bad/evil." Which takes us to:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In order to explain the point, however, it is necessary to use the terminology of both schools, and refer to platonic good and evil.

Post by "Don" of February 21, 2021 at 11:04 AM

I just realized that the good/pleasure and evil/pain equivalency is stated in Cicero's De Finibus with Torquatus speaking:

Quote

Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason.

That seems to me to underscore what I've contended here. We judge good and evil in light of the reaction of pleasure and pain, respectively.