

Odyssey's example of a drug for mental pains

Post by “Onenski” of March 29, 2023 at 4:15 PM

In *Odyssey* Book IV, 220-230 we can read this:

*Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, took other counsel. Straightway **she cast into the wine** of which they were drinking **a drug to quiet all pain and strife**, and bring forgetfulness of every ill. Whoso should drink this down, when it is mingled in the bowl, would not in the course of that day let a tear fall down over his cheeks, no, not though his mother and father should lie there dead, or though before his face men should slay with the sword his brother or dear son, and his own eyes beheld it.*

It was interesting to me the idea of a drug that produces relief from mental pains, and it's specially striking that it's present in a very ancient text.

I know the epicurean point of view on thought experiments (so I think it wouldn't be adequate to ask you if you would take the drug). But I remember the Principal Doctrine No. 10, so, do you think Epicurus would accept Helen's drug?

Also, thinking about Principal Doctrine No. 5, I think it can be interpreted like this: virtues produces a happy life, and a happy life produces a virtuous behaviour. So if that drug produces the absence of mental pain (of course, we would have to keep eating, sleeping, drinking, etc.), then we would act virtuously and pleurably (and according to VS 79, we wouldn't disturb us or anyone else).

I think there's a common opinion that opposes to this approach (the farmacological), but if we consider the goal (the happy life), are these means adequate? If they are or not, why?

Or what do you think? 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2023 at 4:25 PM

I had never heard of that passage. Is there any more context or discussion about it?

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2023 at 4:26 PM

looks like it is here:

[HOMER, ODYSSEY BOOK 4 - Theoi Classical Texts Library](#)

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2023 at 4:40 PM

I read from the beginning of the chapter and it reminds me how little I know of Homer. But I can see that perhaps the drug in that case must be evaluated in full as one of forgetfulness of past events that bring sorrow in remembering them, and from that perspective I think it is a very difficult and hazardous question as to whether forgetfulness of things past would be a wise choice for present or future happiness.

Possibly this points up the hazard of the unmentioned details that are inherent in all pleasure-machine hypotheticals. We are human and through experiments in which we are essentially not human are not likely to be productive.

That's my first impression.

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2023 at 4:44 PM

Given that this passage is in Homer we can be almost certain that Epicurus was asked and addressed exactly this question you are asking.

Post by “Pacatus” of March 29, 2023 at 5:01 PM

[PD10](#). If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.

~ ~ ~

[Onenski](#)

I think a lot hinges on that “If”. But I don’t think it is that simple – dipping my imaginative toe into water where I really don’t want to: if my dear wife died, I cannot imagine taking such a drug to assuage my grief – if it also caused me to forget our years together.

~ ~ ~

Let me share a personal (real) story – since that is, in the end, all I really have to offer:

I was on a business trip, as a passenger in a small plane that was trying to land in strong cross-wind gusts. The pilots had left the curtain between the cabin and cockpit open, so I could see clearly (as well as feel) how the plane was violently tossed about on each failed attempt at approach.

I was truly convinced that I was going to die (not the first time). I remember thinking: “What do I want in my mind at the end?” And I conjured up the image of my dear wife’s face, and just held it there – ignoring everything else. I was not aware when the plane did, eventually, land and taxi to the terminal. I had lost myself, as it were, in that reverie – and had to be shaken out of it to disembark.

~ ~ ~

I wonder if that experience is not akin to Epicurus in his final, painful, days. Assuaging the physical pain (as I did my fear) by remembering in his imagination pleasures with dear friends?

So, yeah – I fell into your thought experiment anyway. ☐ After all, the (at least implied) premise is “what we choose?” – not “what would we have chosen?” if we knew some other unspecified stuff. And how our Epicureanism might inform that. Not? In my case, it would lead me to make the same choice ... (I hope.)

Post by “Cassius” of March 29, 2023 at 5:06 PM

Yes I think what Pacatus is emphasizing and is in the back of my mind is that we have to consider that there are many kinds of pleasures and pains, and the substitution of (1) certain types of pleasures that are less significant to us but that bring no pain, in place of (2) other pleasures that are greater but that also entail pain, would not be a good bargain.

This is a very good conversation for focusing on how the many types of pleasures and pains are not interchangeable. You could ask something similar: Would a pill that brings you “tranquility” at the cost of never experiencing “joy” be worth it?

I would certainly answer that "No."

Post by “Pacatus” of March 29, 2023 at 5:11 PM

[Cassius](#)

Thank you for distilling so well my meandering thoughts! (Not the first -- nor surely the last -- time!). 😊

And especially:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

how the many types of pleasures and pains are not interchangeable

A critical insight, it seems to me.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 30, 2023 at 10:15 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Would a pill that brings you "tranquility" at the cost of never experiencing "joy" be worth it?

That's pretty much the definition of what happens to one's feelings when one tries to dull the pain in one's life, isn't it? When you minimize your pain, over time, your pleasure goes with it.

Post by “Cassius” of March 30, 2023 at 10:41 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

That's pretty much the definition of what happens to one's feelings when one tries to dull the pain in one's life, isn't it? When you minimize your pain, over time, your pleasure goes with it.

Gosh -- how many times have I heard people who are under treatment for various disorders complain that seeking relief through medication that dulls the mind or the senses is not worth it to them? I feel sure they don't mind the dulling of the pain, but when the dullness also makes it impossible to experience joy, that's the rub. I feel the same way many times when I take too many antihistamines!

This exchange points out how important it is to emphasize that Epicurus was not about dulling the senses or emotions in general (sort of like the Stoics get accused of, whether rightly or wrongly) but instead increasing the one while decreasing the other.

So that's an important point in regard to dulling the senses from an overall perspective.

For purposes of debating the finer point, though, I suspect a different set of people, who would not themselves endorse dulling **all** the senses, would nevertheless be attracted by the idea of trading "joy" for "tranquility" because they have a definition of tranquility that to them does not imply dullness. So that's a somewhat different point. I'd like **both,** but if forced to choose between the two as part of some logic game, I would be more inclined to choose "joy" at the expense of "tranquility."

So articulating how joy and tranquility fit together is an important part of articulating the Epicurean perspective, which of course reminds me of that passage from Torquatus:

[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. [41] When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?

or from Cicero:

Cicero, In Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23: "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ...

He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; that *nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures*. But those who said that men should aim at an honorable position, should consult the public interest, should think of duty throughout life not of self-interest, should face danger for their country, receive wounds, welcome death – these he called visionaries and madmen.” Note: [Here is a link to Perseus where the Latin and translation of this can be compared](#). The Latin is: “nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus.” See also here for [word translations](#).

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 30, 2023 at 10:47 AM

In last night's Zoom meeting, we discussed this Homeric tale (of a drug which removes all pain and suffering), and a question came up about no longer needing friends. This morning I was researching something else, and happened upon this (which is only the abstract):

Quote

Are Friends and Friendship Worthwhile to the Advanced Epicurean?

Commentators usually understand the Epicureans to take friends and friendship to be worthwhile because they help us to eliminate and/or manage our bodily and/or mental pains and thus come closer to achieving tranquility. However, this understanding leaves unexplained why friends and friendship might be worthwhile to an advanced Epicurean with few or no pains to manage or eliminate. In this paper, I remedy this deficiency by offering three explanations for why friends and friendship could and maybe would remain worthwhile even to the Epicurean who achieves tranquility. Along the way, I explore some problems with each explanation and consider ways to overcome them. Notwithstanding these problems, I conclude that friends and friendship could and perhaps would be worthwhile even to the Epicurean with few or no pains.

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/1...05/html?lang=de>

Now this article excerpt also goes to show the depth of misunderstanding of the philosophy. The correct understanding is to think about how Epicureans aim to live as blissfully as the gods. Do the ancient gods sit alone in quietude? No, they are always sitting or dancing blissfully together in a long and enjoyable feast. So they need people, and they need

friends.

And thinking further, try this experiment: For several days consider whether or not a human being can actually eradicate all suffering. Is it possible? Especially we all must face the challenges of earning a living. So work is probably one of those arenas in which we need to make careful "choices and avoidances" but even then there will be challenges.

Now a hypothetical...Let's say you are living a serene life of retirement and living in a nice environment with everything you need. There will still be "small pebbles of life disturbing the tranquil pond" of your psyche - this is what it is to be alive. But with wisdom we learn to not "freak out" about things.

So only the gods live a perfectly serene existence without pain or suffering.

Post by "Onenski" of March 30, 2023 at 12:34 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The correct understanding is to think about how Epicureans aim to live as blissfully as the gods. Do the ancient gods sit alone in quietude? No, they are always sitting or dancing blissfully together in a long and enjoyable feast. So they need people, and they need friends.

Thanks for that observation, [Kalosyni](#) . Maybe I was a little excited yesterday 😄 , you're right: friends not only help in facing pain, but they give color to our life and pleasures.

Post by "Onenski" of March 30, 2023 at 12:53 PM

The details of the *Odyssey* are these: Helen's drug was put in the wine of Telemachus and Menelaus, because they were crying a lot. They didn't notice that they were drinking it. The duration of the effect was of one day. After the drank the wine, they went to sleep.

The text says that they "forget every evil" or "every ill",. Since Telemachus can't forget that his father is lost (because he wouldn't know why he's in the palace of Menelaus), the drug probably just stopped the mental pain, he remembers the same.

The passages continues saying that even the death of their parents, or any relative, wouldn't make them cry for one day.

Adapting to epicurean causes of suffering, if I take the drug, it's possible that I still have worries about death, gods, security from other men, etc., but I won't feel any suffering. I could even have more pleasures: be with friends, have a banquet, study nature, dance or whatever. In this case, I guess the only problem can be prudence, because some fears are useful, and the drug doesn't permit to feel them.

Anyway, I don't want to present the thought experiment in a tricky way and make the discussion more and more hypothetical. I just thought that it's another example of the common objection to epicureanism.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 30, 2023 at 1:46 PM

Re: the Homeric example of no pain for one day... typically that just makes the next day more painful, by contrast.

[Kalosyni](#) makes good points about the "advanced Epicurean" needing friends. A couple additional points:

- it's quite common for retirees to have a relatively pleasant life, with all of their material needs met, yet to suffer from extreme loneliness. To different degrees, we all need people.
- motion never ceases, nor does change. So even if an Epicurean reaches an "advanced" stage they are subject to change, and therefore from time to time may experience a desire for friendship.
- at the risk of being absolutist, I would venture that friendship falls into the category of natural and necessary desires. So an "advanced" Epicurean (say perhaps Epicurus), in attaining their advanced stage, would have a group of loyal, like minded friends to which they belong. This would be necessary for meeting the natural and necessary desires. To be otherwise, they might actually be a Cynic or a Stoic.