

Pleasure, absence of pain and PD03

Post by “Godfrey” of September 3, 2023 at 11:13 AM

This probably belongs under "posts by Captain Obvious", but I was just thinking about [PD03](#) and it occurred to me that that particular PD is, among other things, an instruction for removing pain. The reading that absence of pain leads to pleasure has the doctrine backwards. (One might credit Cicero with having a hand in this....)

[PD03](#): *The limit of enjoyment is the removal of all pains. Wherever and for however long pleasure is present, there is neither bodily pain nor mental distress.* St-Andre translation

Reading the second sentence in the most straightforward way says that if you're experiencing pleasure then you're not experiencing pain. It doesn't say that the way to obtain pleasure is to remove all pain, although that's a logical implication of what is said. It's not a Buddhist idea either; it's more of a refutation of the idea that you relieve suffering by removing desire.

If one is attempting to remove a particular pain, following Epicurus' advice here may lead to a series of realizations on the nature of pleasure. One might start with a very fleeting pleasure, discover that eventually that dissipates or leads to further pain (I've sometimes referred to this as papering over pain with pleasure). Continuing to pursue pleasure in the attempt to remove particular pains eventually leads to a deeper understanding of pleasure and its optimal role in one's life. This has nothing to do with pursuing the absence of pain in order to obtain pleasure, in fact it's the exact opposite approach.

Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2023 at 11:37 AM

Let me bootstrap onto that comment something I was about to post separately.

First, I think you're right that this amounts to a prescription that the best way to avoid pain is to be sure that you're experiencing pleasure. Maybe that is Captain Obvious when you admit that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and that when you are experiencing one you are not experiencing the other, but that's an Epicurean position (that there are only two) which forms the heart of some of Cicero's key arguments against Epicurus.

Here's something we discussed from Cicero in today's podcast:

[Quote from Cicero On Ends Reid Book 1 VII 25](#)

What pleasure do you, Torquatus, or what does our friend Triarius here derive from literature, from records and the investigation of historical facts, from conning the poets, from learning by heart so laboriously so many lines? And do not say to me “Why, these very actions bring me pleasure, as theirs did to the Torquati!”

Never indeed did Epicurus or Metrodorus or any one possessed of any wisdom or any knowledge of the tenets of your school ever maintain such a position by such arguments

This is a blatant misrepresentation of Epicurus. If ANY activity which does not bring pain is pleasant, then reading any literature, or poetry, or history is going to bring AT LEAST the type of pleasure that the hand experiences when it is not in pain (per the Chryssipus argument) and of course it is generally going to bring about a much more stimulating pleasure if it is good poetry, literature, or history.

It should be obvious that when we are in physical pain we often seek mental pleasure as a way of getting our minds off that pain, but Cicero seems to want to allege that Epicureans seek nothing but immediate sensory bodily pleasure.

This is blatantly false under Epicurean theory, and Cicero should (and likely did) know better.

Post by “Don” of September 3, 2023 at 2:25 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

that's an Epicurean position (that there are only two)

That's also a position of modern neuropsychology if you look at it as positive and negative affect (coupled with high or low arousal). We are *always* experiencing one affect or the other.