

Another Formulation of The "Absence of Pain" Issue, This One in Response to Elevic

Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2018 at 2:52 AM

[Elevic wrote at Facebook:](#)

This post is not strictly about Epicurean philosophy but reading philosophy in general.

This talk about dialectic might seem superfluous and pedantic nitpicking (I feel this too, sometimes), but this is part of the territory.

I learned from a certain author that we should first understand what an author meant in their terms and propositions before we judge their writings.

Anyone not versed in philosophy might get impressed with the word dialectic as just a fancy word for conversation. I don't think there should be a problem if we stipulate to use it as such. However, it's a technical term in many philosophies, as Elli stated. It has several baggages, if we're not careful.

(That philosophers tend to use certain terms differently and carefully should be apparent.)

Consider this proposition: Pleasure is the beginning and end of life. That's Epicurean philosophy in a nutshell.

But this begs the question of what pleasure is or not.

In this group, we'll often see Cassius, Elli et al discuss this to great lengths - often citing writings from friends and foe.

Why? Pleasure is central to Epicurean philosophy. More often than not, people misunderstand it, or misrepresent the pursuit of pleasure as something evil (what I really hate about Christianity).

Sometimes, an article will be discussed. It's easy to take the valuable aspect and translate into Epicurean terms, but those more versed could sense where the nuance is off.

Some philosophers are tough to read because they demand that you be able to follow extended chains of reasoning. Others, especially contemporary Continental writers are rather obscure.

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You don't seem to get where to start and you're unable to discern if it's worth the trouble.

That's what I find attractive with Epicurean philosophy. Its ideas are simple yet profound!

Nevertheless, even though Epicurean philosophy is so much accessible than a lot of garbage out there, it doesn't mean there are no nuances or details worth discussing or debating.

Prior to joining this group, I was only aware about Lucretius and the letters of Epicurus.

What I admire about Cassius is that he's versed with other ancient writers/writings that contextualize a lot of the discussion about Epicurus.

Having said that, I would like to consider myself as still a child in my understanding of Epicurean philosophy.

It's ****deceptively simple****.

suppose you throw out

pleasure = absence of pain.

Cassius would write that this misrepresents how Epicurus understood pleasure.

Nuances and small differences that imply larger differences in later understanding.

Hence, this is why we have extensive discussions of this or that.

Cassius in Reply:

Elevic's summary is in my view very accurate. Especially since this is a thread for newcomers, I need to repeat the point Elevic raises, because in the middle of the letter to Meneoceus Epicurus clearly says "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul." That sentence must mean something, and no fan of Epicurus can consider it to misrepresent Epicurean philosophy.

The choice is whether to take that sentence as something that can be lifted out of context and interpreted in the way an average person unfamiliar with other Epicurean terms and premises would interpret it, or whether we insist on remembering the prior definitions and premises which Epicurus had stated in other equally or even more fundamental letters, and also earlier in the letter to Meneoceus itself.

This should not be controversial. We do the same thing every day and without controversy as we interpret the earlier line "For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest." That sentence does not mean that supernatural gods such as Yahweh or Allah exist, nor does it mean that knowledge of gods is easy to come by. We know from other clear Epicurean texts that it is impossible for gods to be Supernatural, and that the nature of gods is not to interfere with other beings, as Yahweh and Allah and others are alleged to do. The letter was written to someone already familiar with Epicurean philosophy, and like him we too understand that "for there are gods" does not mean what the non-Epicurean ear would immediately conclude.

In the case of "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain" there is also a context which cannot be ignored without reversing the meaning of the philosophy. An Epicurean like Menoecus would clearly know that Epicurus had held that in the category of feelings there are only two options, pleasure and pain. (We know this both from the letter to Herodotus and from Diogenes Laertius.) When the quantity of anything that is measured is composed of only two things that vary in quantity, the quantity of one is going to be equal to the absence of the other as a matter of course. This exact point is stated with more precision in PD3 as "The limit of quantity of pleasures is the removal of all that is painful." (Bailey translation) Further context is provided earlier in the letter to Menoecus itself, where it is stated that "all good and evil consist in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation" (again Bailey). We know that pleasure is the good because Epicurus says "pleasure is the first good and natural to us" in the same letter. Therefore pleasure has the positive definition of a matter of sensation, and we cannot rationally suppose that it is sufficient to define pleasure in every respect as "absence of pain." The respect in which Epicurus is defining pleasure to be absence of pain is in that of measurement of quantity, not in any other respect. Any normal person knows without elaborate explanation, and simply by observation, that in many very important respects (like whether we desire it or not!) the experience of pleasure is as different as can be from the experience of pain.

One of the fascinating aspects going on here is that there are many people who will argue with great force that "absence of pain" must be interpreted as something other than ordinary pleasure. Like Cicero, they argue that whatever else this passage may mean, it certainly means that "absence of pain" is an experience of pleasure different from the normal bodily and mental pleasures which ordinary people can understand. They argue that Epicurus intended to mean that there are pleasures of "rest" that are superior to the normal everyday pleasures of life, and that these pleasures of "rest," which we can dress up in a dramatic Greek word ("katastematic") are the true goal of Epicurean philosophy.

Cicero explicitly, and a passage in Diogenes Laertius implicitly, have provided generations of commentators with a basis for arguing that Epicurus was pointing to a passive and quietest experience that is "higher" than pleasure itself and far beyond the even the most joyful and delightful experiences of life revealed to us through the senses. That is largely why people of ascetic/stoic disposition can see in Epicurus a kindred spirit, and why some people can expound at great length on Epicurean philosophy without ever mentioning "pleasure" at all!

We are now 2000+ years down the road of this being the dominant interpretation of Epicurean philosophy. Today, however, at least for a brief period of freedom of discussion via the internet, it is possible to consider that the Ciceronian interpretation may be negligently or even intentionally incorrect.

And there is much more going on than I included above. Because once we identify the conflicts inherent in the Ciceronian interpretation, we should ask "Why was Epicurus concerned to make a point about the quantity of pleasure?"

The answer to that, in my view, can only be found by digging into the Platonic/Aristotelian orthodoxy that was popular when Epicurus was alive. That requires digging into Plato's Gorgias, Prtagorus, and especially [Philebus](#) (as well as some Aristotle) to recognize that prior philosophers had argued that pleasure could not be "the good" because no quantity could be identified as the highest possible pleasure. They had reasoned since it was impossible to define a "highest degree of pleasure" (We all want "more," don't we?) that it is therefore necessary to look for "the good" in something besides pleasure itself. (And what did they nominate to replace pleasure? In general, they nominated reason/logic/wisdom, which they argued was necessary in order for us to identify the proper role of pleasure in life.)

Epicurus had to address arguments such as that, and so he responded that the highest and purest experience of pleasure ("maximum" or "limit" are other words to us) is that which we experience when our total experience is pure pleasure and contains no mixture of pain.

This answers the objection that pleasure has no limit, and identifies the greatest good with pleasure undiluted by pain as the definition of the highest and purest pleasure that can be experienced.

This observation refutes Plato and Aristotle when they argued that pleasure was not the highest good, just like the observation that gods are perfect refutes the common view of gods, and the observation that death is the absence of sensation refutes the view that the state of being dead is painful and to be feared.

Unless we know this background the "limit of quantity of pleasure" and the "absence of pain" arguments can seem meaningless, and in failing to understand the reason for them we become easy victims of negligent or intentional misrepresentation. A tremendous amount of research and writing needs to be done on these issues to explore them further. DeWitt, Gosling & Taylor, [Nikolsky](#), and Wenham have started the process, and I hope all newcomers who come across this group will consider looking into these issues themselves and helping us dig into them more deeply.

Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2018 at 8:59 AM

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Since we have mentioned a couple of difficult passages in this thread, we shouldn't forget this one:

"For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure."

My own preferred interpretation of this is that it goes along with the rest of the quantitative analysis, and means that when our total experience is completely filled with pleasures, then we have no need of any MORE pleasures, because our experience is already filled with pleasure and therefore we need not look for any MORE - we could not even process any more if it were available. But many a time I have seen this passage used to argue that the first sentence in the passage means that "absence of pain" is the true goal, and that "pleasure" is not really needed at all -- all we really need is "absence of pain."

We don't have Epicurus or authoritative Epicureans around today to explain these issues to us, so we have to think about how we resolve these apparent contradictions.