

When Epicureans Choose Pain / When Epicureans Treat Pain As Good

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2024 at 8:51 AM

These are just some raw notes for what to include in a possible future presentation on "When Epicureans Choose Pain" or "When Epicureans Treat Pain As Good." Feel free to suggest additions or make comments and treat this as a normal thread.

[Quote from Letter to Menoecus](#)

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided.

[130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

This can be combined with the parallel and longer statement by Torquatus on the same point which explains the theory.

Quote from Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends

To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided.

But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

And then we can draw out examples of how the Epicureans exerted themselves in the study of nature and of writing philosophical treatises which brought greater pleasure than the work involved in doing so. There are lots of other examples too, among which I would include Epicurus choosing to stay alive to experience pleasure even while he was in terrible pain from kidney stones.

In addition to those examples, we can extend the observation to include that mental pleasure is frequently capable of outweighing bodily pain (which is the kidney stone example):

Quote from Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends at XVII

(2) Again, we aver that mental pleasures and pains arise out of bodily ones (and therefore I allow your contention that any Epicureans who think otherwise put themselves out of court; and I am aware that many do, though not those who can speak with authority); but although men do experience mental pleasure that is agreeable and mental pain that is annoying, yet both of these we assert arise out of and are based upon bodily sensations.

(3) Yet we maintain that this does not preclude mental pleasures and pains from being much more intense than those of the body; since the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the mind is also cognizant of the past and of the future. For granting that pain of body is equally painful, yet our sensation of pain can be enormously increased by the belief that some evil of unlimited magnitude and duration threatens to befall us hereafter. And the same consideration may be transferred to pleasure: a pleasure is greater if not accompanied by any apprehension of evil. This therefore clearly appears, that intense mental pleasure or distress contributes more to our happiness or misery than a bodily pleasure or pain of equal duration.

(4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain.

(5) But just as we are elated by the anticipation of good things, so we are delighted by their recollection. Fools are tormented by the memory of former evils; wise men have the delight of renewing in grateful remembrance the blessings of the past. We have the power both to obliterate our misfortunes in an almost perpetual forgetfulness and to summon up pleasant and agreeable memories of our successes. But when we fix our mental vision closely on the events of the past, then sorrow or gladness ensues according as these were evil or good.

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2024 at 10:12 AM

Quote

[130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

We have to be very careful with phrases like "pain as good". I don't know which translation you're using there, but that's not what the letter says. My own more literal translation is:

So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, not all are elected; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned.

Pain is entirely evil, but we have to endure it sometimes for the pleasure that results. But pain is not "good." Pain can be instrumental to gain pleasure, but it is not "good."

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2024 at 11:36 AM

I think that was Bailey but I will check - thanks Don!

Yes I think it was Bailey.

here is Hicks:

[130] It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good.

Yonge -- [130] It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good.

Dewitt: ... by the same reasoning every pain is an evil but every pain is not such as to be avoided at all times. The right procedure, however, is to weigh them against one another and to scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages; for we treat the good under certain circumstances as an evil and conversely the evil as a good.

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2024 at 11:47 AM

Are we focused on different lines perhaps?

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2024 at 11:50 AM

130, right?

. [130] τῆ μέντοι συμμετρήσει καὶ συμφερόντων καὶ ἀσυμφόρων βλέπει ταῦτα πάντα κρίνειν καθήκει. χρώμεθα γὰρ τῷ μὲν ἀγαθῷ κατὰ τινος χρόνους ὡς κακῷ, τῷ δὲ κακῷ τοῦμπαλιν ὡς ἀγαθῷ.

Where was I getting my take then?! Oh, I left it out of my full translation but not the commentary. That's what I get for looking at a translation (even mine!) and not *returning to the books*.

Here's the line in question ..

130b. χρώμεθα γὰρ τῷ μὲν ἀγαθῷ κατὰ τινος χρόνους ὡς κακῷ, τῷ δὲ κακῷ τοῦμπαλιν ὡς ἀγαθῷ.

Let's start at the beginning:

χρώμεθα

This one takes some explaining, and it seems to be often passed over in translation. This verb is in the middle voice which means the subject of the verb is both the agent and experiencer. So, χρώμεθα generally means something like "we consult a god or oracle for ourselves" or "the declaration of an oracle or god." I think this is significant, because, in the context of Epicurean philosophy, there are no gods who are going to provide advice through a supernatural means via an oracle. So, what is going on here? The Epicurean consults their own faculty of weighing the consequences of their own choices.

The word is also used in several more places within this verse.

This is especially important because the next word γὰρ "because" sets up the answer to the question "Why do we 'consult the oracle' of the consequences of our actions?"

Next, we have our old friends μὲν...δὲ.... Let's look at the similarities in those two phrases:

[μὲν] τῷ ἀγαθῷ κατὰ τινὰς χρόνους ὡς κακῷ,

[δὲ] τῷ κακῷ τᾶμπαλιν ὡς ἀγαθῷ.

So, Epicurus is contrasting τῷ ἀγαθῷ "the good (pleasure) with τῷ κακῷ "the bad" (pain). Let's look at the embedded phrases that modify the meaning here.

κατὰ τινὰς χρόνους "over time"

τᾶμπαλιν "on the other hand, on the contrary"

So, "we consult the consequences of our actions because, on the one hand, good/pleasure over time can lead to bad/pain; on the other hand, bad/pain can lead to good/pleasure."

PS .. with κακῷ and ἀγαθῷ being in the dative, that's where I'm getting "leads to." In the sense of the means with which something is done or the cause of something. So, I don't think there's a simple A is B and B is A construction here. That said, I am more than happy for someone with more experience with ancient Greek to comment on that.