

Is A Fish Dinner A Better Prescription For Pain Than a Treatise of Socrates?

Post by "Cassius" of April 24, 2019 at 8:56 PM

When you observe a friend under affliction, would you prescribe him a fish dinner rather than a treatise of Socrates? Or to listen to organ music rather than to Plato?

"Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good; for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men, what would be the

remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words? I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me, that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above." What follows is much the same, and his whole book on the chief good everywhere abounds with the same opinions. Will you, then, invite Telamon to this kind of life to ease his grief? and should you observe any one of your friends under affliction, would you rather prescribe him a sturgeon than a treatise of Socrates? or advise him to listen to the music of a water-organ rather than to Plato? or lay before him the beauty and variety of some garden, put a nosegay to his nose, burn perfumes before him, and bid him crown himself with a garland of roses and woodbines? Should you add one thing more, you would certainly wipe out all his grief.

XIX. Epicurus must admit these arguments; or he must take out of his book what I just now said was a literal translation; or rather he must destroy his whole book, for it is crammed full of pleasures. We must inquire, then, how we

Cicero: Tusculan Disputations
"On Grief of Mind"
Translation by C.D. Yonge

What's going on here? Is Cicero being fair to Epicurus? Would Epicurus really have suggested an ice cream cone as a remedy for someone whose best friend had just died? I don't think so, and think the answer is found in one of Cicero's other works on Epicurus, "On Ends." In that work, the Epicurean Torquatus says:

"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. ***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.***"

If you are the witness of your best friend is dying a painful death, eating an ice cream cone is not going to be a proper response. Attempting to offset a horrible mental pain with a superficial and fleeting physical pain is not going to be much help, nor does it make any sense in Epicurean theory. The Epicureans knew that mental pains can be much more intense than those of the body, and attempting to offset an intense emotional situation by means of food and drink is not going to work.

What **would** be a proper Epicurean remedy? Philosophy is not magic, and Intense painful mental feelings can't be waved away with a magic wand, or by appealing to virtue, or to religion. It seems to me that an Epicurean would say that intense painful mental feelings need to be dealt with, to the extent possible, by intense "pleasurable" mental feelings. An opponent of Epicurus like Cicero will make light of that kind of prescription, but someone sympathetic to Epicurus can well imagine that what Epicurus was talking about was calling to mind images of those things that we value so highly that we know the pain we suffer on their account is worthwhile. That's what Epicurus is recorded to have done when he was on the brink of death - he wrote:

"On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus."

Post by "Cassius" of April 25, 2019 at 7:15 AM

I am afraid the most charitable thing that can be said about Cicero is that he was honestly convinced that the Roman Republic could not survive if everyone became Epicurean. He must have used some such justification in his own mind in order for him to misrepresent so completely the views of Atticus, his best friend, and Cassius Longinus, the person who he looked to to save the Republic from Caesar. Not to mention that he himself had attended Epicurean lectures in Athens, and would have known for himself that his arguments were viciously deceptive.

Apparently either: (1) many people in 50 BC were stupid enough to admire Epicurus and consider themselves Epicurean even though Epicurus suggested that eating fish was a good remedy for losing a loved one, or (2) Cicero was grossly misrepresenting what Epicurus taught.

Option 1 is totally implausible. Option 2 is consistent with the easily observable fact that people who claim a "higher calling" frequently feel justified in lying to pursue their goals:

1 Kings 22:20-23 King James Version (KJV) -

20 And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner.

21 And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him.

22 And the Lord said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so.

23 Now therefore, behold, the Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee.

Important: It's not that Cicero is quoting Epicurus incorrectly - the issue is that the quotes are out of context, and not being applied in the way that an Epicurean would apply them. The quotes are very valuable, because they show us that Epicurus must have had something else in mind other than the absurd meaning that Cicero ascribes to him. And I think the best summary of that meaning is that Epicurus was pointing to FEELING, given to us by Nature, as the proper guide of life, rather than "reason" or "divine revelation" which were suggested to be the proper guides by the philosophers Cicero followed.

Post by “Cassius” of April 25, 2019 at 8:29 AM

Poster:

Cassius, this is an interesting question... I actually DO find that sensory pleasures help replace "mental pain" with pleasure.

For one thing, I can't make a full separation between physical and mental pleasure-- I think the division is imaginary. It's all happening in the body, mediated by the brain. The distinction I can make more easily is between current pleasure and remembered or anticipated pleasure-- the second category involves the brain using memory or imagination to reproduce sensory experiences.

Last night I was listening to Chopin's Nocturnes-- what an incredible thing, to be able at any time to hear recordings of whatever beautiful music we wish to!-- and the pleasure I felt was both bodily and "mental". I can't really see how it would be experienced as pleasure without my conscious mental awareness. And it was intense. I can't imagine I could have had enough multitasking ability for pain to have intruded. The pleasure I felt changed my perspective on a frustrating situation in my family, so that I saw events in a different light. This would be very much in line with research evidence on how physical states change emotional reactions to events.

At some of the most difficult times of my life, focusing on such sensory pleasures-- including paying attention to and savoring my food-- reminded me of pleasure when I thought that feeling was lost. I would not trivialize that at all. It comes dangerously close to establishing higher and lower pleasures.

We have evidence that taking a common pain reliever, ibuprofen, reduces emotional pain. These pathways are not really separate, so that doesn't surprise me.

Emotional pain is felt in the body too-- grief like an ache in the chest, etc.

I use pleasures of memory and imagined futures as well, and those are especially helpful in times of physical pain, just as Epicurus found at the time of his fatal illness. During childbirths, the anticipation of holding my newborns was very helpful, for example.

When I am sad, give me ice cream and organ music first (what a combo that might be-- I'll have to try it!), and hugs, and then it is easier for me to get my thinking in a pleasurable direction.

Post by "Cassius" of April 25, 2019 at 8:41 AM

Yes Poster, I do agree with you. Pleasures are pleasures, because our feelings tell us they are, and any part of our experience which is pleasurable means that that part is not painful. But pleasures and pain do vary in things like intensity and duration. If it were possible to make up for the death of a friend by continuously eating ice cream then that would be a valid strategy, and we would have no reason to complain about such a person who did so (see [PD10](#)). But in

the nature of things some pains are much more intense and long-lasting than can be dealt with fully by ice cream or music. Temporary physical pleasures are not sufficient to rid us of fear of gods or eternal punishment after death, and so we have to study nature and come to the mental understanding, through the pleasure of philosophy, that those things do not exist. Likewise I think that there are many events in life that require mental / emotional responses.

Epicurus reduced his physical pain by surrounding himself with his friends and reminding himself of the pleasures he had experienced through those friends and through philosophy. If we lose a friend, we can recall the good times that we had with them, and think about how we would never have given that up just because we knew we would lose them some day (as per argument in book 10 of A Few Days In Athens).

This is one of the big issues facing many of us today. The world is not friendly to Epicurean and Epicurean philosophy, and seems to be getting less friendly every day. Some people tell us to retreat to our gardens and essentially eat cake. But an observant Epicurean is not going to be content with that. An observant Epicurean will be mentally troubled by the current and impending implication of events, and will have to find a way more potent than food and drink to override that pain. I think that is very doable - and the answer is through focusing on the mental and emotional pleasures that come from not only studying Epicurean philosophy, but taking active steps to promote it, protect it, and work toward its emerging from the shadows one day.

That's essentially what Epicurus and the founders did, it's what Lucretius did, it's what Diogenes of Oinoanda did, and I submit that - while every situation is different - it's what most of us should do to.