

Comments on Painlessness

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2016 at 9:01 PM

[Cassius Amicus](#) J. when your write ""By pleasure, we mean this: freedom from pain in the body and freedom from turmoil in the soul" I would not say you are "misreading" it as much as I am saying that it cannot be taken out of context and treated as if it is disconnected with the rest of the philosophy. There are MANY quotes where Epicurus discusses pleasure in the "normal" sense of that term as sex, food, dancing, etc. And it is clear that Epicurus considered pleasure to be a sensation that we all understand through experience. All of these statements must be reconciled to a coherent whole, and a construction of this particular passage that reads the others out of existence cannot be accepted as logically coherent - and if Epicurus was anything, he was logically coherent, or he would have been laughed off the philosophic stage.

The stoic-sympathetic moderns write off these other passages as unimportant, rather than taking them into account and treating the pleasure= absence of pain as a purely quantitative, not qualitative, measurement. Taken as a quantitative measurement, and starting from the premise that we have only two "passions" - pleasure and pain - then the measure of pleasure is *quantitatively* the absence of pain, just as pain is *quantitatively" the absence of pleasure. And then it has to be remembered that neither calculation has any meaning to the dead, so it must be kept in mind that the entire discussion applies only to those who are living, with all that that entails.

For the reasons I cite in my article (and I am really just pointing back to Gosling and Taylor and other authorities, not saying anything original myself) I believe it is wrong to take the quoted sentence out of context. The best and most authoritative explanation of this comes from "The Greeks on Pleasure", the full text by Gosling and Taylor, but I have done my best to summarize the argument on my page.

[Cassius Amicus](#) I am still working to develop new analogies to drive this point home, but I would cite as an analog what Dewitt says in "Epicurus and His Philosophy" about the Canon of Truth. Here is DeWitt pointing out that the canon is the "TEST of truth," not the "CONTENT" of truth.

"It is an even worse mistake to have confused the tests of truth with the content of truth, that is, the tools of precision with the stones of the wall. This was the blunder of Pierre Gassendi, who revived the study of Epicurus in the seventeenth century. It was his finding "that there is nothing in the intellect which has not been in the senses." From this position John Locke, in turn, set out as the founder of modern empiricism. Thus a misunderstanding of Epicurus underlies a main trend of modern philosophy. This astonishing fact begets an even greater concern for a correct interpretation, which may cause Locke to appear slightly naive."

The analogy to the present discussion is that the statement "pleasure = absence of pain" is true ****quantitatively**** because there are only two "passions/feelings" - pleasure and pain. If we are alive and we feel anything at all, we feel either pleasure or pain, so in quantitative terms of measuring the total of our "feeling experience," the presence of one is the absence of the other. But this statement of quantity tells us nothing about the "content" or the "quality" of the pleasure or pain that is being experienced. That is an entirely different analysis and requires that we enumerate all the normal experiences of pleasure in the form of sex, food, music, dancing, or pain in the form of the many varieties of physical and mental pain.

So as Dewitt points out, the canon of truth is the TEST of truth, but the formula(s) which constitute the canon are not the CONTENT of truth. The "truth" revealed to us through use of the canon varies infinitely with the context of the matter being examined.

I submit we should look at Epicurus' statement by analogy: The formula "pleasure = absence of pain" is an accurate quantitative "test" or measurement of feeling, but it is only a formula. As a formula, the statement does not describe the CONTENT of the pleasure that is being experienced. The content of the experience varies infinitely with the context of the pleasure (or pain) being experienced.

And if we forget that it is the CONTENT that is the really significant thing, we end up obsessing over the tools of precision, and we entirely miss the goal. And the goal is not the tools themselves, but the successful living of life, which is the reason we picked up the tools in the first place.