Philosophies of Happiness

Chapter 2 Epicurus: Supplementary Notes

11. We find this nuance in the ethical treatise of Diogenes of Oenoanda, who carved Epicurean teachings (including the Principle Doctrines and other important fragments of Epicurus’ own words) on the wall of a colonnade, to spread the message of Epicurean therapeutic salvation. (See Diogenes of Oenoanda: The Fragments, ed. C.W. Chilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), xx-xxi.) Diogenes may be responding not only to the conviction of Plato and Aristotle that virtue is intrinsic to happiness, but to the further Stoic conviction that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness. (See A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 121-122. (English). Pamela Gordon, too, affirms that Diogenes presents some arguments that were clearly developed in response to Stoic ideas. Pamela Gordon, Epicurus in Lycia: The Second-Century World of Diogenes of Oenoanda (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 47).

In a fragment from Diogenes’ ethical treatise, we find the claim that if “the question at issue between these people [Stoics?] and ourselves involved examining how do we achieve happiness? And they wanted to say the virtues, as is in fact true, there would be no need to do anything except to agree with them and abandon the matter.” However, the issue in his eyes is not what is the means of achieving happiness, but rather what is happiness, what being happy is and what our nature ultimately desires. Thus, “I affirm now and always, with a great shout to all Greeks and foreigners, that pleasure is the end (telos) of the best mode of life, while all the virtues which are now being inappropriately fussied about by them (being transferred from the position of means to that of end) are in no way the end (telos), but the means to the end.” (Diogenes of Oenoanda (DO) 26.1.2-3.8) Translation by David Wolfsdorf, Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177. Translation by R.W. Sharples: The followers of Epicurus, on the other hand, thought that pleasure is the first appropriate thing without qualification, but they say as we progress this pleasure is subject to distinctions.” He notes the report of Cicero, Fin. 2.32 that for Epicurus “animals and small children experience kinetic pleasure, but not the katastematic pleasure which consists in the absence of pain.” Alexander of Aphrodisias: Supplement to “On the Soul,” tr. R. W. Sharples (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 151 and note 515.

Diogenes of Oenoanda thus portrays Epicurus as clearly engaged in a polemic. He identifies happiness with pleasure. However, this is not pleasure in the Cyrenaic sense—not purely sensual pleasure, and not just pleasure of the moment. It is not pleasure that accrues by stoking our desires so that we can have new sources of fulfillment. Rather, an ongoing state of pleasure is the goal and end of life; this is what our nature ultimately desires (hé phusis hêmôn oregetai) (line 8). Virtue is the means to living pleasantly, but it is not the goal or the essence of the pleasant life. Virtue is inextricably tied to the pleasant life; no one can live pleasantly without living virtuously, or live virtuously without living pleasantly. (LM 132; KD 5). But let us be honest, he tells us. The final end of our lives is living free of worry, pain, and fear; and virtue is the way we do that. If virtue did not bring a pleasant life, it would not have value. (DO 26.1.2-3.8/Long and Sedley 21P; Athenaeus 546 F (Usener 409, 70; Long and Sedley 21M). In On the End he says: “We should honor rectitude and the virtues and suchlike things if they bring pleasure; but if not, we should say goodbye to them.” If virtue does not bring about the wellbeing that constitutes a happy life, it is not worthy of being the final end. Thus in Ciceros’ On the End I:42-54, the Epicurean Torquatus demonstrates how all the virtues are actually means to living the pleasant life. The source of enmity, greed, and fear is ignorance of our true telos; when ignorance is banished, we will live both virtuously and pleasurably.

49. David Glidden challenges this perspective (“Epicurus and the Pleasure Principle,” in The Greeks and the Good Life (Fullerton, CA: California State University; Distributed by Hackett, 1980), 177-97. He
argues that for Epicurus, a *pathos* was delimited to the sensations of pleasure and pain; “for Epicurus, pleasure, like pain, was itself an experience, rather than an aesthetic perspective on one’s experience (187).” In Glidden’s view, for Epicurus it was identified with an atomic event: it was not a judgment, affected by the ways one mentally frames one’s experience (as it was for the Stoics), but the immediate experience itself. When Epicurus says that memory of pleasant conversation alleviated the physical pain of kidney stones, it is not that he judged the kidney stones less painful, but that the mental pleasure of recollection took over a greater place in his consciousness than the physical pain of the kidney stones.

One might argue that this conflicts with the view Epicurus articulates in Principle Doctrines that the living being cannot be in two states at once; he or she is either in a state of pleasure or pain. Perhaps the mental joy of recollection can bring the being from an overall state of pain to one of pleasure. But the better argument is that the same part of a being cannot be in two states at once. The kidneys may be in pain, but the mind in pleasure, and one can direct more attention to the rational pleasure of the mind than to the physical pain of the kidney. Similarly, when we are being restored from a state of thirst to one of hydration, one part of the organ experiences hydration while another experiences thirst.

Philip Mitsis, in contrast, denies that we can reduce pleasure and pain in Epicurus to the level of physical materialist explanation; Epicurus himself brings in intentional language. See Mitsis, *Epicurus’ Ethical Theory: the Pleasures of Invulnerability* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 46 and note 93; cf. Glidden, 189. Pleasure and pain are two ways of being affected, but human beings can also intentionally intervene in this experience.