



On Epicurean Ethics

Cicero

Pleasure as the Chief Good

IX. I will start then in the way approved by the author of the system himself, by establishing what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure. Pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This is behavior which has not yet been corrupted, and its nature remains pure and whole.

Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? Some Epicureans however would refine upon this doctrine: they say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses. The facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain.

X. But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. 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 harmful 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 seduced and corrupted 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 unconstrained 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....

On Pleasure and Pain

XI.For now I shall proceed to expound the nature and character of pleasure itself, and shall try to remove the misconceptions of the ignorant and to make you realize how serious, how sober, how austere is the school that is supposed to be sensual, lax, and luxurious.

The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which directly affects our physical being with a delightful feeling—a positively agreeable perception of the senses. On the contrary, the greatest pleasure according to us is that which is experienced as a result of the complete removal of pain. When we are released from pain, the mere sensation of complete freedom and relief from uneasiness is in itself a source of gratification. But everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain). Therefore the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure. For example, when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of uneasiness brings a resultant pleasure in its train. So generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place.

Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain.

But complete absence of pain Epicurus considers to be the limit and highest point of pleasure; beyond this point pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree. Yet at Athens, so my father used to tell me when he wanted to air his wit at the expense of the Stoics, in the Ceramicus there is actually a statue of Chrysippus seated and holding out one hand, the gesture being intended to indicate the delight which he used to take in the following little syllogism: “Does your hand want anything, while it is in its present condition?” Answer: “No, nothing.”—“But if pleasure were a good, it would want pleasure.”—“Yes, I suppose it would.”—“Therefore pleasure is not a good.”

My father declared that not even a statue would employ such an argument, if it could speak; because though it is cogent enough as an objection to the Cyrenaics, it does not touch Epicurus. For if the only kind of pleasure were that which so to speak tickles the senses, an influence permeating them with a feeling of delight, neither the hand nor any other member could be satisfied with the absence of pain unaccompanied by an agreeable and active sensation

of pleasure. Whereas if, as Epicurus holds, the highest pleasure be to feel no pain, Chrysippus, though justified in making his first admission, that his hand in that condition wanted nothing, was not justified in his second admission, that if pleasure were a good, his hand would have wanted it. And the reason why it would not have wanted pleasure is that to be without pain is to be in a state of pleasure.

Proving that Pleasure is the Highest Good

XII. The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration: let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? To be in such a state, one must possess a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

Suppose on the other hand a person crushed beneath the heaviest load of mental and of bodily anguish that can befall a person. Grant him no hope of ultimate relief in view also give him no pleasure either present or in prospect. Can one describe or imagine a more pitiable state? If then a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure is the ultimate good. In fact the mind possesses nothing in itself upon which it can rest as final. Every fear, every sorrow can be traced back to pain; there is no other thing besides pain which is of its own nature capable of causing either anxiety or distress.

Furthermore, pleasure and pain supply the motives for the desire to seek and avoid and to act in general. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the *telos*—the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live agreeably.

Virtue as a Means to Pleasure

XIII. Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school fixates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science, but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure. (The meaning that I attach to pleasure must by this time be clear to you, and you must not be biased against my argument owing to the discreditable associations of the term.)

The great disturbing factor in a man's life is ignorance of good and evil; mistaken ideas about these frequently rob us of our greatest pleasures, and torment us with the most cruel pain of mind. Therefore we need the aid of Wisdom, to rid us of our fears and appetites, to root out all our errors and prejudices, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment

of pleasure. Wisdom alone can banish sorrow from our hearts and stops us from trembling in fear. Put yourself to school with her, and you may live in peace, and quench the glowing flames of desire. For the desires are incapable of satisfaction; they ruin not individuals only but whole families, nay often shake the very foundations of the state. It is they that are the source of hatred, quarreling, and strife, of sedition and of war. Nor do they only flaunt themselves abroad, or turn their blind onslaughts solely against others. Even when they are shut up inside the heart, they quarrel and fall out among themselves; and this cannot help but make the whole of life embittered. So only the Wise Man, who prunes away all vanity and error, can possibly live untroubled by sorrow and by fear, content within the bounds that nature has set.

Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus' doctrine of the classification of desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense. The natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.

XIV. If then we observe that ignorance and error reduce the whole of life to confusion, while Wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of appetite and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and to peace, why should we hesitate to avow that Wisdom is to be desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and folly to be avoided because of its injurious consequences?

Specific Virtues

The same principle will lead us to pronounce that Temperance also is not desirable for its own sake, but because it bestows peace of mind, and soothes the heart with a tranquilizing sense of harmony. For it is temperance that warns us to be guided by reason in what we desire and avoid. Nor is it enough to judge what it is right to do or to leave undone; we also need to abide by our judgment. Most men however lack tenacity of purpose. Their resolution weakens and succumbs as soon as the fair form of pleasure meets their gaze, and they surrender themselves prisoners to their passions, failing to foresee the inevitable result. Thus for the sake of a pleasure at once small in amount and unnecessary, and one which they might have procured by other means or even denied themselves altogether without pain, they incur serious disease, or loss of fortune, or disgrace, and not infrequently become liable to the penalties of the law and of the courts of justice.

Those, on the other hand, who are determined so to enjoy their pleasures as to avoid all painful consequences therefrom, and who retain their faculty of judgment and avoid being seduced by pleasure into courses that they perceive to be wrong, reap the very highest pleasure by forgoing pleasure. Similarly also they often voluntarily endure pain, to avoid incurring greater pain by not doing so. This clearly proves that Intemperance is not undesirable for its own sake, while Temperance is desirable not because it renounces pleasures, but because it procures greater pleasures.

XV. The same account will be found to hold good of Courage. The performance of labors, the undergoing of pains, are not in themselves attractive, nor are endurance, industry, watchfulness, nor yet that much lauded virtue, perseverance, nor even courage; but we aim at these virtues in order to live without anxiety and fear and so far as possible to be free from pain of mind and body. The fear of death plays havoc with the calm and even tenor of life, and

to bow the head to pain and bear it abjectly and feebly is a pitiable thing; such weakness has caused many men to betray their parents or their friends, some their country, and very many utterly to ruin themselves. So on the other hand a strong and lofty spirit is entirely free from anxiety and sorrow.

It makes light of death, for the dead are only as they were before they were born. It is schooled to encounter pain by recollecting that pains of great severity are ended by death, and slight ones have frequent intervals of respite; while those of medium intensity lie within our own control: we can bear them if they are endurable, or if they are not, we may serenely quit life's theater, when the play has ceased to please us. These considerations prove that timidity and cowardice are not blamed, nor courage and endurance praised, on their own account; the former are rejected because they beget pain, the latter coveted because they beget pleasure.

XVI. It remains to speak of Justice, to complete the list of the virtues; but this admits of practically the same treatment as the others. Wisdom, Temperance, and Courage I have shown to be so closely linked with Pleasure that they cannot possibly be severed or detached from it. The same must be deemed to be the case with Justice. Not only does Justice never cause anyone harm, but on the contrary it always adds some benefit, partly owing to its essentially tranquilizing influence upon the mind, partly because of the hope that it warrants of a never-failing supply of the things that uncorrupted nature really needs. And just as Rashness, License, and Cowardice ever torment the mind, ever awakening trouble and discord, so Unrighteousness, when firmly rooted in the heart, causes restlessness by the mere fact of its presence; and if once it has found expression in some deed of wickedness, however secret the act, yet it can never feel assured that it will always remain undetected.

The usual consequences of crime are, first suspicion, next gossip and rumor, then comes the accuser, then the judge. Many wrongdoers have even turned evidence against themselves, as happened in your consulship. And even if any think themselves well fenced and fortified against detection by their fellow men, they still dread the eye of heaven, and fancy that the pangs of anxiety night and day gnawing at their hearts are sent by Providence to punish them. But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one's fellows?

Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their greed, ambition and love of power, lust, gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more—inasmuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint rather than for reformation. Men of sound natures, therefore, are summoned by the voice of true reason to justice, equity, and honesty. For one without eloquence or resources dishonesty is not good policy, since it is difficult for such a man to succeed in his designs or to make good his success when once achieved.

On the other hand, for the rich and clever generous conduct seems more in keeping, and generosity wins them affection and good will, the surest means to a life of peace; especially as there really is no motive for transgressing since the desires that spring from nature are easily gratified without doing any man wrong, while those that are imaginary ought to be resisted, for they set their affections upon nothing that is really wanted; while there is more loss inherent in Injustice itself than there is profit in the gains it brings.

Hence Justice also cannot correctly be said to be desirable in and for itself; it is so because it is so highly productive of gratification. For esteem and affection are gratifying, because they render life safer and fuller of pleasure. Hence we hold that dishonesty is to be avoided not simply on account of the disadvantages that result from being dishonest, but even far more because when it dwells in a man's heart it never suffers him to breathe freely or know a moment's rest.

If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure.

More on Pain and Pleasure

XVII. Now that this doctrine has firmly been established, I shall briefly expound on some corollaries. (1) The Ends of Goods and Evils themselves, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake; where people go wrong is in not knowing what things are productive of pleasure and pain.

(2) Again, we argue 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.

XVIII. Here is indeed a royal road to happiness—open, simple, and direct! For clearly man can have no greater good than complete freedom from pain and sorrow coupled with the enjoyment of the highest bodily and mental pleasures. Notice then how the theory embraces every possible enhancement of life, every aid to the attainment of that Chief Good which is our object. Epicurus, the man whom you denounce as a voluptuary, cries aloud that no one can live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly, and no one wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly.

The Need to Control the Passions

For a state torn apart by civil unrest cannot prosper, nor a house whose masters are at strife; much less then can a mind divided against itself and filled with inward discord taste any particle

of pure and liberal pleasure. But one who is perpetually swayed by conflicting and incompatible counsels and desires can know no peace or calm.

Why, if the pleasantness of life is diminished by the more serious bodily diseases, how much more must it be diminished by the diseases of the mind! But extravagant and imaginary desires, for riches, fame, power, and also for sensual pleasures, are nothing but mental diseases. Then, too, there are grief, trouble and sorrow, which gnaw the heart and consume it with anxiety, if men fail to realize that the mind need feel no pain unconnected with some pain of body, present or to come. Yet there is no foolish man but is afflicted by some one of these diseases; therefore there is no foolish man that is not unhappy.

Moreover, there is death—the Tantalus rock always hanging over men’s heads—and superstition that poisons and destroys all peace of mind. Besides, they do not recollect their past nor enjoy their present blessings; they merely look forward to those of the future, and as these are of necessity uncertain, they are consumed with agony and terror; and the climax of their torment is when they perceive too late that all their dreams of wealth or station, power or fame, have come to nothing. For they never attain any of the pleasures, the hope of which inspired them to undergo all their arduous toils. Or look again at others, petty, narrow-minded men, or confirmed pessimists, or spiteful, envious, ill-tempered creatures, unsociable, abusive, brutal; others again enslaved to the follies of love, impudent or reckless, wanton, headstrong and yet irresolute, always changing their minds. Such failings render their lives one unbroken round of misery....

The Importance of Friendship

XX. There remains a topic that is absolutely essential to this discussion, and that is friendship. Your school maintains that if pleasure be the Chief Good, friendship will cease to exist. Now Epicurus’s pronouncement about friendship is that of all the means to happiness that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none more fruitful, none more delightful than this. Nor did he only commend this doctrine by his eloquence, but far more by the example of his life and conduct. How great a thing such friendship is, is shown by the mythical stories of antiquity. Review the legends from the remotest ages, and, copious and varied as they are, you will barely find in them three pairs of friends, beginning with Theseus and ending with Orestes. Yet Epicurus in a single house and that a small one maintained a whole company of friends, united by the closest sympathy and affection; and this still goes on in the Epicurean school.

But to return to our subject, for there is no need of personal instances: I notice that the topic of friendship has been treated by Epicureans in three ways:

(1) Some have denied that pleasures affecting our friends are in themselves to be desired by us in the same degree as we desire our own pleasures. This doctrine is thought by some critics to undermine the foundations of friendship; however, its supporters defend their position, and in my opinion have no difficulty in making good their ground. They argue that friendship can no more be sundered from pleasure than can the virtues, which we have discussed already. A solitary, friendless life must be beset by secret dangers and alarms. Hence reason itself advises the acquisition of friends; their possession gives confidence, and a firmly rooted hope of winning pleasure. And just as hatred, jealousy, and contempt are hindrances to pleasure, so friendship is the most trustworthy preserver and also creator of pleasure alike for our friends and for ourselves. It affords us enjoyment in the present, and it inspires us with hopes for the near and distant future.

Thus it is not possible to secure uninterrupted gratification in life without friendship, nor yet to preserve friendship itself unless we love our friends as much as ourselves. Hence this

unselfishness does occur in friendship, while also friendship is closely linked with pleasure. For we rejoice in our friends' joy as much as in our own, and are equally pained by their sorrows. Therefore the Wise Man will feel exactly the same towards his friend as he does towards himself, and will exert himself as much for his friend's pleasure as he would for his own. All that has been said about the essential connection of the virtues with pleasure must be repeated about friendship. Epicurus well said (I give almost his exact words): "The same creed that has given us courage to overcome all fear of everlasting or long-enduring evil hereafter, has discerned that friendship is our strongest safeguard in this present term of life."

(2) Other Epicureans, though by no means lacking in insight, are a little less courageous in defying the opprobrious criticisms of the Academy. They fear that if we hold friendship to be desirable only for the pleasure that it affords to ourselves, it will be thought that it is crippled altogether. They therefore say that the first advances and overtures, and the original inclination to form an attachment, are prompted by the desire for pleasure, but that when the progress of intercourse has led to intimacy, the relationship blossoms into an affection strong enough to make us love our friends for their own sake, even though no practical advantage accrues from their friendship. Does not familiarity endear to us localities, temples, cities, gymnasia, and playing-grounds, horses and hounds, gladiatorial shows and fights with wild beasts, then how much more natural and reasonable that this should be able to happen in our intercourse with our fellow-men!

(3) The third view is that wise men have made a sort of compact to love their friends no less than themselves. We can understand the possibility of this, and we often see it happen. Clearly no more effective means to happiness could be found than such an alliance.

All these considerations go to prove not only that the theory of friendship is not embarrassed by the identification of the Chief Good with pleasure, but also that without this no foundation for friendship whatsoever can be found.

Cicero. *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. Trans. H, Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.

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