

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF EPICURUS' MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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1. The Relation of Virtue to Pleasure

The question of virtue and its role in ethics was raised for the Epicurians by the stoics. The growth of stoicism, which made virtue, as against pleasure, the *summum bonum* in life, yielded a subsequent increase of importance to the topic of virtue and given rein to a heated controversy between the two schools. Epicures, like the Stoics, meant by virtue the action which is morally good and right. But against their deontologies account he spropounded a teleological account of virtue. The Stoics maintained that it is the intrinsic nature of action or off the will of man that makes action virtuous or vicious. Against this hypothesis Epicurus maintained that it is the namely pleasure, that make them virtuous.

Since, for Epicurus, pleasure is the sole intrinsic good, desirable for its own shake, it follows that virtue has no value of its own account. It merely derives its value from its conduciveness or not to the ultimate end of pleasure. Its value is exclusively instrumental. Diogenes laertiussumps up the thesis succinctly but quite explicitly:

"And we choose the virtues too on account of pleasure and not for their own sake, as we take medicine for the shake of health."¹

Epicurus' real concern is which course of action on each occation will produce the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest period of time. He notices that the virtuous course of action is on the whole a useful means towards the achievement of this end. Therefore, the virtuous course of action, even in the case where it is laborious and painful in itself, must be adopted because of its utility. Close connection can be drawn here between Epicureanism and the eighteenth century utilitarianism. Epicurus' emphasis on the consequences of every action as a criterion of its approbation or disapprobation, could be properly described as an assertion of Bentham's "principle of utility".² For Epicurus it pays to be virtuous.

1. Diogenes Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*, J.S. Watson with the oretical version of T.M. Good, op. cit., 128.

2. J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1978), ch.11, sec.6