That It Is Not Possible to Live Pleasurably According to the Doctrine of Epicurus, by Plutarch

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by
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Plutarch was born a Roman citizen sometime before 50AD to an elite family in an Athens suburb named Chaeronae. He lived his entire life in his hometown-- though he traveled widely-- before dying sometime after 120AD. As priest for Apollo the last 30 years of his live, he presided over religious ceremonies in Chaeronae and Delphi, was said to have been a governor of Archaea under Hadrian, and had other important Roman connections. Plutarch authored many works, of which we have 128 extant.

Plutarch's work against Epicurus' teachings, "That It Is Not Possible To Live Pleasurably According To The Doctrine of Epicurus," is set forth as a record of dialog between Plutarch and four of his close colleagues as they leave school to take their usual walk in the local gymnasium. They discuss a work by Epicurus' confidant, Colotes, which defends the doctrines of Epicurus against other great philosophers who, Colotes accuses, set forth tenants by which it is impossible to live. Plutarch begins his work with an attempt to earn rapport with his readers, admonishing that "those who will needs be contradicting other men may see that they ought not to run cursorily over the discourses and writings of those they would disprove, nor by tearing out one word here and another there, or by falling foul upon particular passages without the books, to impose upon the ignorant and unlearned." Plutarch then proceeds to presents his opponent's doctrines in question:

- "they suppose their last good [is] to lie about the belly and such other conveyances of the body as let in pleasure and not pain."
- they "are of opinion, that all the brave and ingenious inventions that ever have been were contrived at first for the pleasure of the belly, or the good hope of compassing such pleasure."

Plutarch and his colleagues begin not with a direct contradiction to these tenents, but by merely downplaying the degree of possible benefit which might be obtained in such:

> "...they found their pleasure in a poor, rotten, and unsure thing, and one that is equally perforated for pains, by the very passages they receive their pleasures by; or rather indeed, that admits pleasure but by a few, but pain by all its parts. For the whole of pleasure is in a manner in the joints, nerves, feet, and hands; and these are oft the seats of very grievous and lamentable distempers, as gouts, corroding rheums, gangrenes, and putrid ulcers. And if you apply to yourself the exquisitest of perfumes or gusts, you will find but some one small part of your body is finely and delicately touched, while the rest are many times filled with anguish and complaints."

Convincing as it is, this statement also provides an interesting parallel to Paul's usage of such ideas commenting on the Body of Christ-- the Church (I Cor. 12:12-27). As Plutarch appeals to what he feels his readers would understand-- members of the body which are suffering will negate any pleasure which might be had in another member, so also Paul appeals to this same understanding in his readers, suggesting that one member of the Body of Christ should not suffer without all the Body suffering with it (v. 26). Though, Paul then goes on to a different conclusion which would not help Plutarch's argument-- that when one member of the Body of Christ is honored, so all the members rejoice.

Plutarch finishes his diminishing of bodily pleasures by noting, "Nor are they of any long

durance, but, as so many glancing meteors, they are no sooner kindled in the body than they are quenched by it." But of pain he observes,

> "For pain will not troll off as pleasure doth, nor imitate it in its pleasing and tickling touches. But as the clover twists its perplexed and winding roots into the earth, and through its coarseness abides there a long time; so pain disperses and entangles its hooks and roots in the body, and continues there, not for a day or a night, but for several seasons of years..."

Concluding that this is all "owing to the baseness of the body and its natural incapacity for a pleasurable life; for it bears pains better than it doth pleasures."

The argument then turns to a proposal of a right medium for man's highest good: the soul/mind, which, he proposes, all who have "contemplative and civil knowledge" will understand. It is interesting to note that Plutarch begins by using the word *soul* when accusing his opponents of merely "mak[ing] use of the soul but as a funnel for the body," but then goes on to defend the *mind*, seemingly using this term interchangeably:

> "but the mind, receiving but the remembrance only of past pleasure, like a kind of scent, retains that and no more. For as soon as it hath given one hiss in the body, it immediately expires, and that little of it that stays behind in the memory is but flat and like a queasy fume: as if a man should lay up and treasure in his fancy what he either ate or drank yesterday, that he may have recourse to that when he wants fresh fare."

Having shown how bodily pleasures do not satisfy the mind, and memories of such are rather only "an

empty shadow and dream of that pleasure that hath now taken wing and is fled from them, and that serves but for fuel to foment their untamed desires," a final blow is then dealt by appealing to the reader's sure ill memories past of blokes who have boasted of "how oft they have lain with Hedia or Leontion, or where they last drank Thasian wine, or at what twentieth-day feast they had a costly supper." He admonishes his reader, "Neither doth it befit men of continence and sobriety to exercise their thoughts about such poor things..." His transition culminates in pointing out the inconsistencies of Epicurean doctrine when attempting to articulate the relationship between the body and the mind:

> "...look first what work they make, while they course this same thing--whether it be pleasure, exemption from pain, or good health--up and down, first from the body to the mind, and then back again from the mind to the body, being compelled to return it to its first origin, lest it should run out and so give them the slip."

He goes on to accuse them of poor and fickle reasoning by charging that "they place the pleasure of the body (as Epicurus says) upon the complacent joy in the mind, and yet conclude again with the good hopes that complacent joy hath in bodily pleasure." Later evidence is given as a direct quote from "Epicurus, where he saith: The very essence of good arises from the escaping of bad, and a man's recollecting, considering, and rejoicing within himself that this hath befallen him."

Turning straight into the benefits of his proposed medium, Plutarch begins with the counterpart of where he began at denigrating the body-- stressing the potential benefit of the mind:

> "For man's mind hath not, like the sea, its tempests and storms only from without it, but it also raises up from within far more and greater disturbances. And a man may with more reason look

for constant fair weather in the midst of winter than for perpetual exemption from afflictions in his body."

Plutarch points out that even his opponents acknowledge the potential of what the mind can offer to, or deter from, their hedonism. As an example he poses that "they say that those who commit wickedness and incur the displeasure of the laws live in constant misery and fear" of retribution. Embedded in this reasoning is another interesting quote which touches on a common subject with the Apostle Peter. Throughout I Peter we find an admonishment not to suffer unjustly, but rather to endure suffering when doing good-- as Christ is our example in such (I Peter 2:19-25; 3:17-18; 4:14-16) To the contrary, Plutarch offers no hope in such circumstances when he argues that "it is not suffering unjustly but suffering in itself that is dismaying." But when suffering, not just endurance, rather hope is found for the Christian who has faith in what is sure, even "in this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;" (I Peter 1:6-7)

Again, moving on, Plutarch prologues his descriptions of true meaningful life with an impugnment of his opponents, who

"mistake the middle temperament for the extreme and outmost part. Thus do Epicurus and Metrodorus, while they make avoiding of evil to be the very essence and consummation of good, and so receive but as it were the satisfaction of slaves or of rogues newly discharged the jail, who are well enough contented if they may but wash and supple their sores and the stripes

they received by whipping, but never in their lives had one taste or sight of a generous, clean, unmixed and unulcerated joy."

These joys are finally held up against their opponents' counterparts to reveal their eclipsing glory. First Plutarch compares Epicurus' desire to merely annihilate trouble and affliction, with accounts of men who both met and conquered such, heroically:

> "...when a story that hath in it nothing that is troubling and afflictive treats of great and heroic enterprises with a potency and grace of style such as we find in Herodotus' Grecian and in Xenophon's Persian history, or in what,
>
> Inspired by heavenly gods, sage Homer sung,
>
> or in the Travels of Euxodus, the Foundations and Republics of Aristotle, and the Lives of Famous Men compiled by Aristoxenus; these will not only bring us exceeding much and great contentment, but such also as is clean and secure from repentance. And who could take greater satisfaction either in eating when a-hungry or drinking when a-dry amongst the Phaeacians, than in going over Ulysses' relation of his own voyage and rambles? And what man could be better pleased with the embraces of the most exquisite beauty, than with sitting up all night to read over what Xenophon hath written of Panthea, or Aristobulus of Timoclea, or Theopompus of Thebe?"

From epic and history, Plutarch moves on to mathematics, science, and music, by claiming that

“Though the satisfactions we receive from history have in them something simple and equal; but those that come from geometry, astronomy, and music inveigle and allure us with a sort of nimbleness and variety, and want nothing that is tempting and engaging; their figures attracting us as so many charms.” He presents an example of Sophocles: “I'm mad; the Muses with new rage inspire me. I'll mount the hill; my lyre, my numbers fire me.” (From the "Thamyras" of Sophocles, Frag. 225) He calls an artist as direct witness against Epicurus, stating that “Nicias, as he was drawing the Evocation of Ghosts in Homer, often asked his servants whether he had dined or no, and when King Ptolemy had sent him threescore talents for his piece, after it was finished, he neither would accept the money nor part with his work...” He goes on to cite astronomers and mathematicians Euclic, Archimedes, Apollonius, Aristarchus, and Pythagoras, presenting the rapture they demonstrated at perfecting their science. He further praises their achievements by conferring joy to their students, saying that “bare contemplating and comprehending of all these now engender in the learners both unspeakable delights and a marvellous height of spirit.” And again to contrast, “it doth in no wise beseem me, by comparing with these the fulsome debauchees of victualling-houses and stews...” Though comparing is indeed his task, as he suggests that all these, when finally discovering the completion to their famed achievements cried, “I have found it!” “But we never yet heard of a glutton that exclaimed with such vehemence, 'I have eaten!'”

Attention is then turned to thoughts of his defeated foes' end. As our bodies grow old, unable to enjoy Epicurean pleasures, what joys are left for one who has spent a lifetime in such only.

“But, in my opinion, it would be more advisable for these sensual lechers, when they see that

age will dry up so many of their pleasures, and that, as Euripides saith,

> Dame Venus is to ancient men a foe,
>
> (Euripides, "Aeolus," Frag. 23.)

in the first place to collect and lay up in store, as against a siege, these other pleasures, as a sort of provision that will not impair and decay; that then, after they have celebrated the venereal festivals of life, they may spend a cleanly after-feast in reading over the historians and poets, or else in problems of music and geometry. For it would never have come into their minds so much as to think of these purblind and toothless gropings and spurtings of lechery, had they but learned, if nothing more, to write comments upon Homer or Euripides, as Aristotle, Heraclides, and Dicaerchus did."

Plutarch's next point begins with an accusation that his opponents state a true thing, but do not faithfully adhere to this statement by following their remainder of doctrine. His point of accusation has an interesting theme which, again, seems common to New Testament writing:

> "Now themselves somewhere say that there is far more satisfaction in doing than in receiving good; and good may be done many times, it is true, by words, but the most and greatest part of good consists in action" (cf. Acts 20:35; I John 3:18)

Plutarch then goes on to demonstrate how heroes have braved the very things which Epicurus abhors, to save cities, release captives, and restore families, rather than merely sending them a basely meal. Even if for the joys only of the doers, Plutarch argues:

> "What and how great then may we presume the pleasures of Plato to have been, when Dion by

> the measures he gave him deposed the tyrant Dionysius and set Sicily at liberty? And what the pleasures of Aristotle, when he rebuilt his native city Stagira, then levelled with the ground, and brought back its exiled inhabitants? And what the pleasures of Theophrastus and of Phidias, when they cut off the tyrants of their respective countries? For what need a man recount to you, who so well know it, how many particular persons they relieved, not by sending them a little wheat or a measure of meal (as Epicurus did to some of his friends), but by procuring restoration to the banished, liberty to the imprisoned, and restitution of wives and children to those that had been bereft of them?"

Another interesting sword in Plutarch's arsenal is the value of pride. One side seems to directly conflict with the New Testament teaching against pride in oneself, but the other side presented may not be: the joy of being the recipient of another's pride. "Epaminondas herein bears me witness also, when he saith (as is reported of him), that the greatest satisfaction he ever received in his life was that his father and mother had lived to see the trophy set up at Leuctra when himself was general." Plutarch strikes a low blow as then compares Epaminondas' parents with Plutarch's opponents'

> "Let us then compare with Epaminondas' Epicurus' mother, rejoicing that she had lived to see her son cooping himself up in a little garden, and getting children in common with Polyaenus upon the strumpet of Cyzicus. As for Metrodorus' mother and sister, how extravagantly rejoiced they were at his nuptials appears by the letters he wrote to his brother in answer to his; that is, out of his own books."

In conclusion, Plutarch sets many joys which are noble against those claimed by his opponents. This contrast is a demanding argument in favor of a noble and honorable life. Most principles which Plutarch has discovered are indeed real truth set forth as evident by Almighty God. Though, as Christians, we understand that no good earns any distance to entrance into eternal Heaven, Plutarch is an attestation that aspects of truth and good are discoverable in a heart not totally depraved of all such knowledge. A summary conclusion, spotted with truth, is best left to Plutarch, himself:

> "these men draw out the dimensions of their pleasures like a circle, about the stomach as a centre. And the truth is, it is impossible for those men ever to participate of generous and princely joy, such as enkindles a height of spirit in us and sends forth to all mankind an unmade hilarity and calm serenity, that have taken up a sort of life that is confined, unsocial, inhuman, and uninspired towards the esteem of the world and the love of mankind. For the soul of man is not an abject, little, and ungenerous thing, nor doth it extend its desires (as polyps do their claws) unto eatables only,--yea, these are in an instant of time taken off by the least plenitude, but when its efforts towards what is brave and generous and the honors and caresses that accrue therefrom are now in their consummate vigor this life's duration cannot limit them, but the desire of glory and the love of mankind grasp at whole eternity..."