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Reasonings about Philodemus' *On Choices and Avoidances*

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

On Choices and Avoidances is an evaluation of the criteria by which a philosopher must make decisions. Traditionally in Epicureanism, the simple answer to how to make moral or personal decisions is that we should conduct hedonic calculus, that is: the comparative evaluation of the pleasure versus pain that one gains in the long term. If one follows this general guideline, one attains net pleasure in the end, which is the goal.

The Doctrine of the Principal Things

However, men of prudence need to know much more than this. They need a complete philosophical education that helps them to discern between the different kinds of desire and of pleasure and to pay close attention to the things that really matter for human wellbeing, the *kyriotatai*, the chief goods or principal things. Not being able to discern clearly what these things are leads to suffering, disillusion and confusion. These chief goods are things that lead to life, health, and happiness and include specifics like shelter, food, safety, and association.

If a philosopher clearly discerns what really matters, on the other hand, he will be able to make firm decisions and have full confidence in how he manages his life. Therefore, we must keep in mind what these real natural needs are.

In relation to these chief goods, men must have a clear understanding that externalities are only secondary and firm confidence that they can not affect our happiness in the way that the easy to procure chief needs can. This is clarified in Column XV, and mentions things like beauty, marriage, wealth, luxury, and the like.

The inability of foolish men to recognize the chief goods in life also produces societies where men are ruled by fear. Column XII mentions that laws that threaten with death and beliefs about divine punishment only work with men who do not know true precepts of philosophy. In our discussion of the scroll [On Frank Criticism](#), we discussed how Confucius taught that "when leaders are virtuous, the people naturally feel shame when they are wrong whereas when leaders are not virtuous, they rule by fear instead and people follow the law for fear of punishment." However, here Philodemus is expressing the same idea viewed from the other perspective: a foolish man can not imagine being ruled by anything other than irrational, unfounded fear. That is what he knows. If a society has enough foolish men, it will likely invent these fears or produce the tyrants to meet the demand.

Column V. For men suffer the worst evils for the sake of the most alien desires which they take to be most necessary— I mean desires for sovereignty and ... reputation and great wealth and suchlike luxuries ... they neglect the most necessary appetites as if they were the most alien to nature.

Column IX. Many and great evils concerning many matters occur as a result of the worthless assumptions of mindless men and are avoided as a result of the right concepts.

The scroll begins by mentioning some of the opinions that have been presented regarding the matters that will be discussed: some have called for uncalculated hedonism (the Cyrenaics), others call for reserving judgement until all the facts are known about a matter, others claim that knowledge is not possible and that grief and joy are empty notions (the Skeptics). It then asserts the last two of the Four Cures:

*the good is both limited and easy to attain
the bad is both limited and easy to bear*

and then restates them as meaning that one does not seek a thing that does not remove pain and that one does not avoid that which doesn't prevent pleasure; instead one avoids that which prevents pleasure.

On the Pleasures

Column VI. (of natural pleasures) some are necessary, others not necessary; and of the former ones themselves some are necessary for life, others for the health of the body, others for living happily.

When Philodemus says that some desires are necessary for life, it is understood that here he means for our safety and protection. This includes the need for shelter and for the rule of law. These necessary pleasures are declared to be the natural end and goal of life, as established by nature itself.

Column XI. (Choices and avoidances) are accomplished successfully when we measure them by the ends laid down by nature.

Let's ponder what this means by considering what happens in nature: just as birds must build a nest, lions must roam a certain territory where they can catch prey, and apes must live on trees for safety, so humans also have a territorial instinct and need a the warmth and sweetness of a home for safety, familiarity, and protection.

Just as carnivores and plant-eating animals all have their peculiar dietary needs, similarly humans must maintain their health with wholesome foods. We also must take care of our mental health as social animals, in the same manner that a baby chimpanzee must have tactile connection with its mother for the first two years and many animals are happier and best protected when they are part of a pride, pack or some other group. We instinctively seek the pleasure of company and affiliation.

Lion cubs play with each other, and like many other species in doing so they learn important skills: when they play hide-and-seek, they're honing their instinct to prowl and chase. But in the end, they play because they're happy. They naturally do this, and do not need encouragement from others or effort on their part. Nature guides them, through pleasurable activities, to the necessary things in life. This is one way in which we can gain a better understanding of how the good, needful things are easy to attain.

Against the False View that the Gods Exhibit Volition

Column VII of the scroll contains a warning against belief in divine providence, saying that it causes innumerable failures

Column VII. For (these men) place themselves in such a situation so as to not take advice from anybody about anything at all, in the belief that nothing depends on man, but everything is controlled by the god.

In our own day and age many people who criticize the lack of action with regards to global warming oftentimes point the finger at apocalyptic beliefs among certain Christian groups, who hold that the Earth MUST be destroyed prior to Christ's return and that, therefore, it is written that there will be cataclysms. Even more evil is the belief that there must be a great war prior to the return of Jesus that will devastate most of Earth, as this belief has made many Christian groups not just docile before greedy oil and military industrial complex investors who have appropriated the political machine to advance military plans that they profit from handsomely. There have always been conservative Christian groups, particularly in the US, who have been willing to celebrate such military agendas with the excuse that "it is written".

To this example must be added the heinous example of medieval burnings of midwives, which was justified by reasoning that the pain of child-birth was originally intended as God's punishment of all women for all eternity for Eve's transgression. She ate the apple, ergo all women must suffer at child-birth, and to reduce the pain of women giving birth is therefore to challenge God's law. But as with the above example, the execution of midwives during the Dark Ages was also profitable to a new class of professionals: male doctors, who were seeking to replace midwives in this role. It was also profitable for a large number of people in the legal profession, for whom the inquisition generated employment.

Without going into much detail, one must not fail to mention the many historical instances of holy wars and persecution, the Crusades, terrorist attacks and other evil acts done in the name of a God who is imagined as having a will, and a distorted sense of volition at that. God clearly "willed" the Jews to inherit Palestine and inhabit it forever as the Bible says, but then he "willed" that Muslims fight to the death anyone who persecutes them or throws them out of their homes for the sake of their religion. Is he being a Cosmic Don King, initiating fights to profit or take pleasure, in some sick manner, from the bloodshed? It's more reasonable to suppose that mortals imagine their Gods doing THEIR will, and place convenient words in the mouths of their Gods.

And so we must not underestimate the dangers of fatal beliefs, that is, beliefs in oracles and in the notion that fate has been pre-determined by gods. These forms of superstition are profoundly dangerous and harmful. They freeze the actions of mortal agents in the expectation that supernatural aid knows best and that its will is unavoidable. They make mortals negligent and irrationally fearful of acting against the gods.

Philodemus also criticizes men who hold false beliefs about how the Gods can affect the afterlife. Many men believe that the evils that will befall mortals in the afterlife far surpass the goods that the Gods bestow while living, so they neglect living. This was as true in the days of Philodemus as it is today. Many people view pleasure as bad. They fear that if they sweeten their lives or achieve great things, they will be punished for doing so in the afterlife, that somehow one has to suffer or not live a pleasant life in order to *earn* a paradise after one dies.

The proverbial destruction of the Tower of Babel, which the Biblical God viewed as an act of human arrogance, is actually based on a similar Sumerian myth (*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*). The premise here is that the Gods not only treat humans perpetually as children, but they are also imagined as easily given to anger and/or envious of human achievement. These views are seen by us as small-minded and superstitious, perhaps as projections of our own character flaws.

Imaginary Evils

By speaking of things that "resemble evils", Philodemus makes a clear distinction between true evils and imagined ones. This invites further contemplation. Just as we must learn to have firm conviction about the *kyriotatai* or principal goods, and distinguish these from vain desires, so must we also recognize true evils, and distinguish them from imaginary evils.

These evils arise from superstition—but also from ungratefulness, which to us is a fundamental flaw in the human character that must be treated. The ungrateful person does not enjoy the good when he has it, and has the bad habit of being mindfully unhappy and mindlessly happy, which is the opposite of what the prudent man does.

There are instances where we see a combination of superstition and ungratefulness. We see it in the person that goes to the doctor, regains health, and thanks only God, not the doctor, not the scientists, when a cure is provided. Perhaps it doesn't occur to him that the doctor made great sacrifices and studied diligently for over a decade to be able to practice medicine, or that for generations scientists diligently researched chemicals and natural compounds that led to the production of a cure, or that the doctor may have had help from the state or scholarships in order to be able to afford school. There are lands where medical assistant is unavailable or scarce. People fail to nurture accurate values when they are mindless and ungrateful.

Column X. They lament if they are afflicted by things which resemble evils, both the evils deriving from ingratitude towards men and the fatherland, and also the evils resulting from superstition, that is, because they take god to be the cause of both death and life ... and because of the sorrow that weighs upon them on account of their death, they become irascible and hard to please and ill-tempered.

The term *death denial principle* was coined in the 1970's and has been the object of research since then, but it's interesting to note that the scrolls of Philodemus had a reference to this same idea 2,000 years ago. The idea is that people invent all kinds of religious fantasies, rituals, rites and many other cultural expressions in order to escape their anxiety about their own mortality. Recent research on the *death denial principle* has uncovered that people who have not evaluated these anxieties and worked through them also exhibit greater levels of hostility towards those who are different and are more judgemental, particularly right after they are reminded of their own mortality.

Philodemus here touches on a very deep insight about human nature. He says that those who haven't therapeutically treated their apprehensions about death become "irascible, hard to please, ill-tempered", which is not far from what recent research has found. As we will see when we study the Philodemus scroll *On Death*, this fear is also an imaginary evil.

On the other hand, there is the "we will die anyway" excuse, which Philodemus covers in Column XVII. This is the excuse that mortals use to avoid living up to their highest potential, to avoid conducting hedonic calculus and taking ownership for their choices and their creation. In his example, he speaks of people who abandon philosophy and do not accomplish noble and great things with this excuse, and attributes this attitude to ungratefulness—for the ungrateful do not expect gratitude in return for their good deeds. I've heard it from smokers who won't quit and who damage their quality of life and health with this excuse.

Against Existing Only to Die

Now, Philodemus of Gadara lived during the first century Before Common Era. Therefore, he did not live to see this particular heresy become virally widespread as it became several centuries after he lived. Saul of Tarsus taught that mortals are saved and gain immortality by faith. But even before the rise of Christianity, Philodemus would have witnessed the initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries and the Orpheic mysteries and other such cults making similar claims about immortality through faith and participation in rituals.

The specific evil that he criticizes about these faiths in the afterlife had to do with the initiates' unwillingness to live while they're alive.

Column XVIII. "Do I not live decently and justly? Or do I not live in accordance with the laws applying to men? Then when I shall die I shall be immortal." And they are cut off from everything by means of which they would have a better life, exactly like men who are sentenced to death.

In other words, in the expectation of a blissful afterlife, it is easy to not follow our bliss in this life. Time rushes through people and they do not experience the joys or seek the things that make life worth living. They look forward to the time after death as a consolation, and fail to live. Philodemus later says that such people at times neglect their health—even as they are frightened by diseases—and other things that matter, avoid great pleasures for fear of troubles in the afterlife, and he lists many other evidences of lacking an art of living.

Because they burden themselves needlessly in this manner, such a life is equated to a death sentence. As we saw in our discussion of the scroll *On Death*, it is one thing to exist, quite another to live.

The Qualities of the Prudent

After listing the qualities of the person who does not understand what really matters, Philodemus then turns to the person who does understand the easy-to-attain chief goods and has full confidence in his ability to procure them. The text mentions that he works with equanimity, either because he does so for the sake of friends or because he has “closely examined the things which yield fruit in return for his labours”.

The commentary explains that the prudent man chooses mild toils with great pleasures, in other words he subjects his labor paradigm to hedonic calculus, choosing activities that are useful and maximize his revenue. Such a man is content with only the necessary amount of money and is not greedy, lives in the present, is generous, industrious, and self-sufficient, and remains always devoted to philosophy. He’s friendly, caring, and grateful to others in the hopes that others will do likewise in the future. He also, importantly, takes good care of his health and self-betterment, administers his property diligently and reminisces about the past both analysing it and being grateful for it.

After establishing the criteria for successfully making choices and avoidances based on the chief goods and needful things, and teaching us the importance of being confident in our abilities to procure these, Philodemus then gave a list of examples of what happens when people fail to distinguish between natural and necessary pleasures and those that are vain and unnecessary.

The scroll ends with this auspicious account of how the prudent man who is aware of the chief goods, lives a virtuous life.

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The above reasonings were inspired by the following source: G. Indelli, V. Tsouna-McKirahan (edd., trans.): [Philodemus]: [On Choices and Avoidances]. (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, La Scuola di Epicuro, Collezione di testi ercolanesi diretta da Marcello Gigante, 15.) Pp. 248. Naples: Bibliopolis, 1995. ISBN: 88-7088-343-4.