

## Some Epicurean conclusions

Post by "Stan85" of May 24, 2018 at 9:39 PM

Thank you for your thoughts. I was not familiar with the text of Diogenes of Oenoanda quoted above. The idea of present pleasure caused by future anticipation is one I've come across before, but I didn't know its origin. The text also renders the dictum that "virtue is its own reward" in an Epicurean color. It reminds me of a passage in a book by E.T. Jaynes, a physicist who made contributions to probability theory, where he is concerned to separate *physical* causality from *logical* causality. Come to think of it, was this not one of the major points of criticism that Carneades and his followers leveled at the Stoics and their notion of divine *logos*? I don't remember the details of their criticism, but it would seem that confusing the two concepts is so natural that it would take a genius to discern the distinction for the first time.

I wasn't raised in any religious tradition and my parents were agnostics with no religious affiliation, but I consider myself a reluctant atheist or agnostic. I suspect that William James (another reluctant agnostic) was right that immortality is a natural human need. To me the doctrine that we have a stake in what happens long after we are gone inasmuch as we derive pleasure from contemplating our posthumous reputation, or "the good that we shall leave behind us," has something of the character of a perpetual motion machine once you've removed any conception of good beyond pleasure itself.

But be it as it may, I think my difficulty with the Epicurean treatment of mortality is only a consequence of a more general difficulty in Epicurean ethics. We voluntarily endure present pain and hardship in order to attain future goods: some kind of achievement, the mastery of an art or a field of knowledge, or reputation, or wealth, a trophy wife, the safety of the state--what not. So far not only will the Epicureans agree with me, they'll remind me that, far from giving unalloyed pain, the struggles and the toils on the way to attaining future goods are themselves considerable sources of pleasure; some would say that they are the sources of *the greatest* pleasure that we ever experience. So far we're in complete agreement. But let me bring forward a psychological observation. Take the list of good things that were just mentioned. Ordinary common sense would classify some of the things on that list (knowledge, safety) as things that are *good in themselves*, others, like a trophy wife, as avenues to pleasure and little more. Now I don't think I'd be mistaken to remark that, as a matter of fact, we reap much greater pleasure when we work toward those things that we see as *inherently good* rather than as means. Indeed, we would experience *hardly any pleasure at all* when working for something that we see as *nothing but a means to pleasure*. But of course, unlike common sense, Epicureanism sees pleasure as the sole good, the one principle by which the goodness of things is to be judged. Therefore, as a matter of psychology, a consistent Epicurean could not find pleasure in work, in any kind of sacrifice of the present for the future. Ironically, he is cut off from the most common, the most easily accessible fountain of pleasure in human life.

Thank you for taking the time to read my ramblings. I'll be interested to hear your thoughts.