

"Epicurean Mission and Membership" - Very Interesting Article by MacGilivray On Ancient Epicurean Missionary Spirit

Post by "Kalosyni" of May 9, 2022 at 4:23 PM

I now see that Cassius wrote a long reply to the Wilson article, on FB, and here it is:

Quote

Catherine Wilson continues to be one of the better writers on Epicurus today. Who could disagree with the title of her article? ~~Aside from her~~ willingness to accept the church fathers and Plato as "greats" I agree there is a lot of good material in this. However I'd like to talk about these two paragraphs:

"Epicurus made it clear from the start that he did not advocate the direct pursuit of personal pleasure in the forms of gluttony, indiscriminate sex or overconsumption of intoxicating substances. This was foolish, as it ultimately produces pain. Real pleasure arises from judicious - though not overly fussy - "choice and avoidance", and avoidance is as important as choice.

Epicurean ethics reduces to a few simple principles: avoid harming others and live so that others have no motive to harm you. Form agreements with them for mutual aid and protection. The greatest good for a human being, Epicurus thought, is friendship - pleasure in the presence of another individual, and the security of knowing that help will be given if ever it is needed."

My response:

(1) Epicurus did endorse the pursuit of food, sex, and other pleasures, but not (as she correctly observes) to the point of gluttony which ultimately produces more pain than pleasure. But to talk about "real pleasure" is something else: I would submit that Epicurus clearly says that "all pleasures are desirable" and there is really no such thing as a "false pleasure" --- if you want to talk about pleasures to be avoided, the point is that some pleasures produce more pain than pleasure in the end, when summed all together.

(2) I have even more concern about saying that "Epicurean Ethics reduces to a few simple principles" wherein those she lists a series of things in which pleasure is almost an afterthought. As she often does, Catherine Wilson is playing to current social norms and attempting to justify in modern terms. The goal of Epicurus is unwavering: pleasure

for yourself and those who are your friends. Yes, a good way to do that is to live justly and honorably, but that is not the goal - the goal is the pleasure. Even less well stated is the statement that "the greatest good for a human being is 'friendship.'" Epicurus is very emphatic in defining the greatest good in philosophic terms as pleasure -- and Wilson is mixing the means and the ends in saying that he held the greatest good to be friendship. Epicurus clearly stated that of all the things that the wise man will seek in order to procure a life of pleasure, the greatest is friendship. That makes friendship, like virtue itself, a tool toward pleasure, and not the end in itself. Wilson is no doubt well aware of this, but not content to point out that Epicurus said that one would die for a friend, or be as hurt at the torture of a friend as when tortured himself, she mixes the end and the means so as to appeal to a wider audience.

Time for the reminder from Diogenes of Oinoanda, who perhaps one day will have shouted loud enough for even Ms. Wilson to hear:

Fr. 32

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

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