

If Death Is Nothing To Us, Then Life Is Everything to Us

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2023 at 11:13 AM

It occurs to me to say this about the alternatives:

FIRST:

42. At the very same time, the greatest good is created and the greatest evil is removed.

That could be correct if stated in the context of Usener 423, that the realization of the escape from death, which is from most perspectives the worst thing that can happen to someone, brings the greatest joy in exhilaration that you have avoided death:

U423 Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their “thing delighted” – their good – is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: “That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good.”

SECOND:

Epicurus.net “The same time produces both the beginning of the greatest good and the dissolution of the evil.”

Understandable in pretty much the same as as the first alternative.

THIRD:

Bailey: “The greatest blessing is created and enjoyed at the same moment.”

I agree with DeWitt that this statement is counterintuitive, not true, and therefore in DeWitt's word nonsensical.

FOURTH (DeWitt)

The same span of time embraces both the beginning and the end of the greatest good.

Presuming Don is correct as I do, this is an interpretation of a difficult sentence. I would say that regardless of whether it is what the original text said, this (along with the first two above alternatives) are correct statements of Epicurean theory. And I would further say that while the first two alternatives are limited to the situation of "escape from death," DeWitt's interpretation has the advantage of being both true to Epicurus and being more broadly applicable and therefore useful along the lines of the airliner analogy from the last podcast. I am not going to frequently need to understand that "escape from death" is one way to get a rush of enjoyment. On the other hand, I am frequently going to need to remind myself that there is no pleasure, no good of any kind, except for the span of time between birth and death while I am alive.

This may be an instance where DeWitt's interpretations outrun the text, but nevertheless I think where he ends up is both correct and highly valuable.

And that would be another example where, if the Epicurean commentator world had accepted this sentence from DeWitt in the 1950's when he wrote it, we would be a lot further along in rebuilding an Epicurean "movement" true to the origins of the school:

Quote from Quote from "Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240 - Norman DeWitt (emphasis added)

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. *The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.*"

I am conscious that many people probably read my exchanges with Don on this and think we are arguing with each other for no reason other than stubbornness. On the contrary, I think it is not really an "argument" but an exploration of the details, and the discussion is highly useful because it is going to lead to a lot of beneficial results. If we weren't having this back and forth it would be highly tempting just to drop the subject before the implications are fully brought out. We'd just be adding to the long list of people who read about Chrysippus' hand with glazed eyes and move on. Instead of making progress those people would just keep looking for the new form of pleasure that is better than sex, drugs, and rocknroll that they have been told by the commentators is hiding somewhere and will be found if they will just live a more ascetic life. The normal course is that they eventually stop looking and drop Epicurus altogether, and that needs to change.