

Pros and Cons Of Considering Epicurean Philosophy To Be A "Religion"

Post by "Cassius" of January 31, 2024 at 3:47 PM

You know, in regard to this use of words issue, I have been struck over the last several months by this passage from page 240 of DeWitt's book:

Quote

"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 have read lots of books and articles on Epicurus but I can't recall a paragraph that expressed this issue in quite this way - a way I find much more clear than anything else I recall reading.

You could repeat that format over and over with other key concepts such as:

The fact that the name of virtue was not customarily applied to define conduct that is practically efficient to producing a pleasurable life 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.

The fact that the name of gods was not customarily applied to beings that are not supernatural, or to blissful ways of life to which we should aspire, 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.

The fact that the name "absence of pain" was not customarily applied to all experiences of pleasure 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.

The fact that the name "death is nothing to us" was not customarily applied to describe the state of non-being after death, 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.

There are probably other examples as well, but those are the first that come to mind.

Further -- I am sure that other writers must have written other short and concise and clear statements of Epicurean "clarification" or "redefinition" as it relates to understanding the philosophy. Maybe some of you guys can think of statements similar to that passage from page 240 of EAHP. Unfortunately, what I seem to remember is statement after statement to the effect that "Epicurus didn't really mean pleasure, he meant absence of pain," with an explicit or implicit nod toward this being a Stoic or Buddhist or apathetic way of looking at the question.

If you can think of other formulations similar to DeWitt's, focusing on "absence of pain" applying to any non-painful experience whatsoever ("the normal state of being") please post them, and if there are enough we'll make a new thread of them.

This is an extremely important issue to understand. People who aren't willing to be flexible in following the twists and turns of word meaning are never going to be anything but frustrated with Epicurus -- as was one Marcus Tullius Cicero.