

Is All "Ataraxia" Equal?

Post by "Don" of February 19, 2024 at 11:33 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

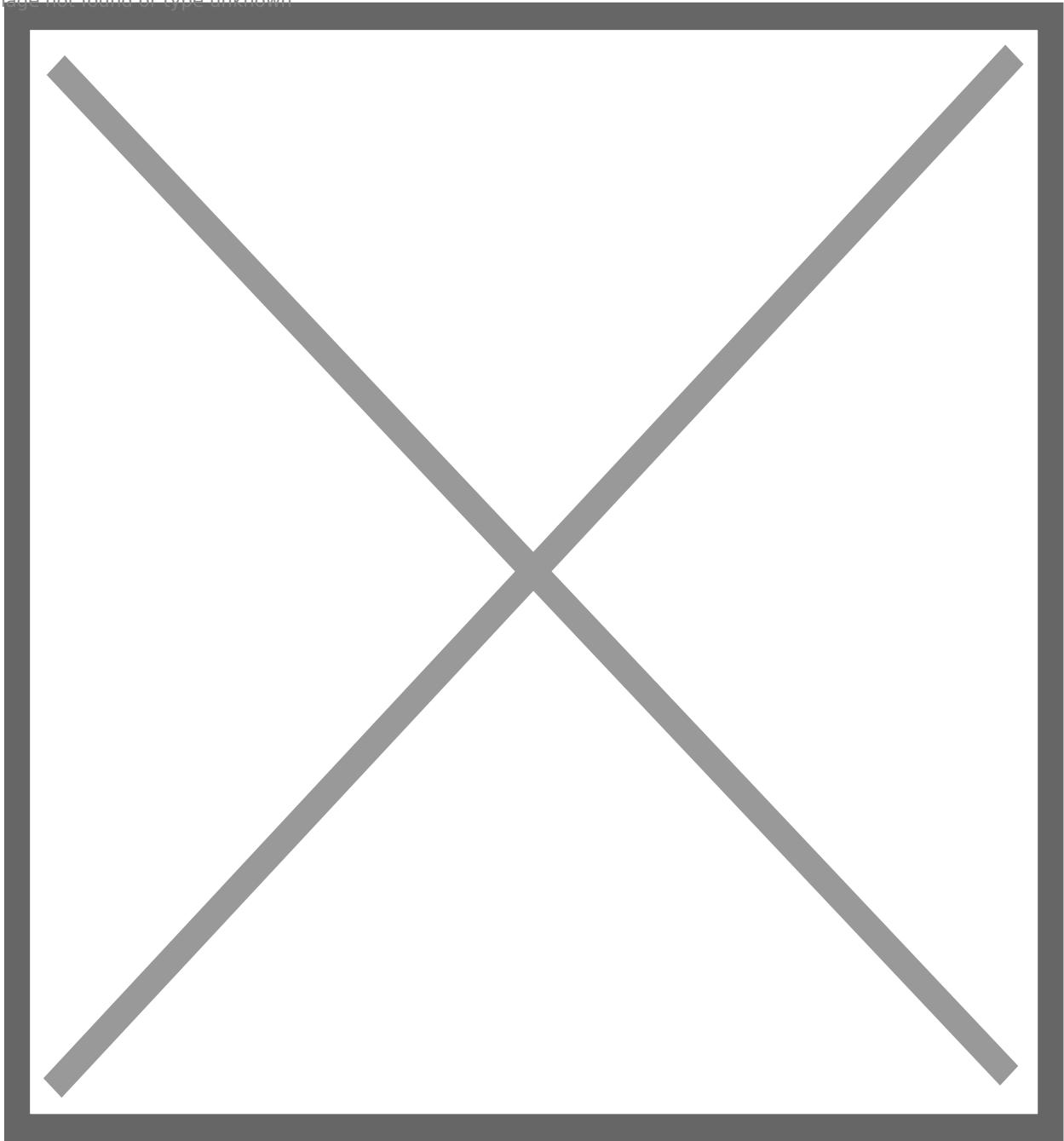
The idea of fulfilling natural and necessary needs while sitting in a cave by drinking water and eating bread is a state of idealized sanctification. While it focuses on the relatively low hardware requirements concerning human material needs, it ignores all the other variables to our lives in our ever-changing material conditions.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

While there are definitely times and places in world history where sitting in a cave and subsisting on bread and water would be exactly the right course of conduct, doing as some do and setting up such states of existence as not only desirable, but the highest life desirable for a human being, would be better described in my view as "supremely stupid."

I feel the urge to address the "cave and bread" metaphor as it raises its head yet again. This is a favorite metaphor of Cassius's to illustrate the popular but misguided conception of Epicurean philosophy as ONLY satisfying the "natural and necessary" desires. As I understand it, the "cave" signifies the idea that Epicurus walled himself off from the world in the Garden, like some kind of medieval anchorite:

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[Anchorites: Medieval Women And Men Walled Up Alive](#)

During the Middle Ages, thousands of women and men chose to be walled up alive. Read on to discover why anchorites were willingly immured.

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The popular "cave" isolation idea is simply wrong. The Garden, as I hope I've shown in my impromptu presentation and longer article available on the forum, wasn't isolated from Athenian society. The primary reason Epicurus taught in the Garden is that, as I understand, it was private property and he could do what he wanted there. The gymnasiarchs and others had

no control or authority over what he taught there. It was what we would call "a safe space." What happens in the Garden stays in the Garden, to riff on a Vegas ad campaign. But that doesn't mean it was "cut off" or walled off from society (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*)... but I digress.

The "bread" is taken as literal instructions on how to live from the Letter to Menoikeus and other snippets taken out of context. I addressed the "maza (barley bread or porridge) and spring water" in my Menoikeus commentary to my satisfaction at least... but I am but a lone voice crying in the wilderness... (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*)

To take one random example of this conception, here's one of the first results in a web search on [Epicurus live on bread]

<https://classicalwisdom.com/people/philosophers/epicurus-proto-scientist-secular-saint-and-sophisticated-hedonist/>

Quote

Just as important to the Epicurean ethic is a *reduction of desires*. *If we want less, we will be happy with less*. The Epicurean path to happiness is not a result of an excess of external pleasures or material goods. Live simply, and without an excess of wealth or luxury, says Epicurus, and with that proclamation he very well may lay claim to the title of "first western minimalist!" Moderation, temperance, and cheerfulness are Epicurean virtues; unbridled luxury and feverish desire Epicurean vices.

From my readings, Epicurus does want us to look at our desires practically and with discretion. This website's "*If we want less, we will be happy with less*" is *almost* right, in my opinion. I would expand that to say "In times of want, we will be happy with less because we understand that we don't require - it is not a necessity - to have luxuries or even variety in all circumstances if we recognize the pleasure right in front of us. However, if we have the opportunity to partake of luxuries and variety with a minimum of stress, enjoy them! But don't think you *need* them to have a sense of well-being in your life." But that's a little wordy for a breezy podcast website!

I realize the "cave and bread and water" metaphor is a convenient shorthand for this on-going, perpetual, bang-one's-head-against-the-wall frustration with most/many popular and academic takes on Epicurus and his school and philosophy. That is exactly one of the reasons I like and recommend Dr. Emily Austin's *Living for Pleasure* so highly! I think she got it exactly right...but again... voice, Wilderness, (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*).