

Scientific Support for Psychological Hedonism

Post by "Cassius" of April 22, 2024 at 2:01 PM

A_Gardner reminded me of something else that I wanted to be sure to add to this thread, on the issue of whether Epicurus would consider the term "psychological hedonism" as something he would use to promote his own philosophy.

As I think was noted by Fernando in our discussion in a Wednesday Zoom, there is quite a difference between saying "all living things do pursue what they consider to lead to their greatest pleasure," as against "all living things should pursue what they find pleasurable to them." The latter is closer to Epicurus, but even that has something else that in my view overshadows the whole issue:

Even more important in my view is that I don't think that Epicurus made the observation that living things "do" pursue pleasure except in the case of "the young of all species" which he clearly delimited by saying "before they become corrupted."

Quote from On Ends Book One

[30] "Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions."

It strikes me essential to remember that it is core and crucial Epicureanism that intelligent beings like humans have the power of free will, and we can become corrupted and choose NOT to follow Nature and NOT to pursue pleasure -- our decisions can be perverted and biased and affected by other considerations, such as pursuing "virtue" or pursuing "the will of the gods."

As far as I am concerned the jury is still out on when and where discussion of a term like "psychological hedonism" may be helpful. But I am convinced that discussion of that term without discussing Epicurus' real position -- that humans DO NOT always pursue pleasure as their supreme good and DO NOT always recoil from pain as their supreme evil.

The sources of corruption in human affairs are very strong, and it would be perverse to ignore that those sources of corruption often do lead people to pursue other goals which are not in fact their own greater pleasure. If Epicurus had not thought that were true, there would have been no reason at all for his philosophy.