

A Quote from Hobbes' "Leviathan"

Post by "Cassius" of August 14, 2019 at 8:52 PM

D.G. :

A few more quotes from Hobbes' text Leviathan: " the felicity of this life consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such finis ultimus (utmost aim) nor summum bonum (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live whose desires are at an end than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man's desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire. And therefore the voluntary actions and inclinations of all men tend not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life, and differ only in the way, which ariseth partly from the diversity of passions in diverse men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired. So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more." ... I wonder what Epicurus would say to Hobbes? This quote is especially interesting in light of the Epicurean emphasis on friendship and community as aids to security and comfort. As it can be difficult to secure the objects required to satisfy even one's natural and necessary desires (continuously); especially in the contemporary world."

Cassius:

David my reaction to the Hobbes quote so far as it goes is generally positive. Even the sentence " For there is no such finis ultimus (utmost aim) nor summum bonum (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers" to which I think Ilkka is objecting, could be reconciled I think.

It seems to me that much of the "ultimate good/summum bonum" discussion comes from Cicero, which DeWitt attacks I think with much success. It's from these same considerations that DeWitt talks about life itself being a higher good from some perspectives, in that pleasure means nothing to the dead.

The latter part of the quote about needing more I suspect is tied to other arguments and other contexts which are not clear from this excerpt.

But if the basic point is that there is no state of rest in time after which a person can say "I'm here and that's all I need" then I think that is something Epicurus would agree with.

I share some of Ilkka's concerns but I think you are right in asking about this and thinking it is compatible to at least some degree.

Also I don't think this has a problem reconciling with the description of the full vessel as the analogy of the best life. That analogy seems to me more of a logical device to respond to Platonism, and to show that pleasure has a limit, but that device does not mean that we can look to fill our experience with pleasure at any one moment and consider that we are "finished."

As is said here, we are not finished pursuing pleasure until we die.

I hope others will comment here. This does seem to me like an interesting way to look at several important issues.

D.G.:

Ilkka indeed; I suppose as students of Epicurus' philosophy it is useful to think through Epicurus' position(s) relative to other schools of thought. One point the quote makes is that by nature desires are recurrent. For instance, the desire to procure food day to day. I was wondering if these kinds of concerns are mitigated in part by the Epicurean emphasis on community and friendship; as Hobbes' observation will be that these desires are easier to satisfy in civil society. I disagree on your last point; sometimes necessary desires are not easy to satisfy; hence people die of starvation, exposure and lack of security far too frequently.

Cassius:

I was rereading your post David and this struck me as funny:

" For instance, the desire to procure food day to day. I was wondering if these kinds of concerns are mitigated in part by the Epicurean emphasis on community and friendship; "

I know you didn't mean it that way yourself, but the idea that "friendship" could fix the human need to eat every day strikes me as pretty much exactly the kind of stretched logic of people who want to make Epicurus into a stoic.

Yes if we organize our lives properly it becomes easier to find food at eat every day, but friendship in no way relieves us of hunger and the need to eat, any more than "absence of pain" or "ataraxia" constitutes a state that means that we aren't going to pursue normal mental and bodily pleasures.

That's where I think Hobbes was going (or should have been going). There is no single "goal of life" that we can reach like the stoics reach their mountain peak of virtue. There's only the guide that nature gives us to live life moment by moment looking for as much pleasure as possible (which also means keeping pain to a reasonable minimum.)

We need to presume that Epicurus had at least as much common sense as we do, and any interpretation of Epicurus that violates common sense should immediately be ruled out of court as inconsistent with what we know about Epicurus.