

Epicurean Attitudes Toward Emotion

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2020 at 11:21 AM

I will be very interested in comments from other readers on this essay. There are several aspects of this article that reinforce my view that people should be cautious in trying to read too much into fragments from Philodemus or anyone else. It seems highly unlikely to me that Epicurus thought it wise to hyper-analyze any emotion any more than he would obsess on any one pleasure, because the issue is so contextual. In fact the very attempt to derive strict rules on anger or any other emotion, just like with any pleasure, would violate the core premises of the philosophy. There are several references in this article that make clear that the later followers of Epicurus were disputing among themselves about this, and we ought to first ask if they were on the wrong track by even following this path at all, rather than presume that they were in some desirable manner expanding or extending or improving on what Epicurus had taught.

Yes we need to think about these issues and that's the purpose of this thread, but attempting to come up with bright line rules for anger or any other emotion is probably exactly the wrong direction to take, because it is in the nature of the philosophy that such bright line rules do not exist in nature, but can only be generalized arising from the context of the totality of the individual's circumstances.

Ultimately, given how little Julia Annas seems to really derive out of the exercise, that may be one of the main take-aways from her work here.

Epicurean Emotions

Julia Annas

IN CONTRAST to the Stoic theory of the emotions, Epicurean theory on this topic has been somewhat neglected. This is partly because there does not seem to be much theory in our sources; and I shall admit at the start that the theory I find is inferred rather than read off from our sources—a frequent situation in Epicurean studies. Partly also it may be because one of our best sources is Philodemus' *On Anger*, a work that, like all Philodemus, is frequently scholastic, baffling, and difficult even to construe.¹ This fascinating treatise is nevertheless useful in many ways, for it shows us Philodemus adjusting Epicureanism to a changing philosophical climate; and his main line of analysis of the emotions is, I shall argue, an adaptation of one of Epicurus' ideas developed in a different context.

But two points are relevant here. One is that at this stage in his essay Philodemus is engaging in controversy with other Epicureans, who had differing views about the way anger enters into the life of the ideal wise person; sketching the ideal life is always difficult, and Philodemus' idea on the subject is not the only one, even for Epicureans. Given that all parties refer to the words of the Master, we may infer that Epicurus' own work left this point in dispute, and that different followers took up different aspects of the system to deal with it. Possibly Philodemus was impressed by Epicurus' statement that natural desires are easy to fulfill; this would suggest that natural anger, based on natural desires, is not a different kind of anger but just a more *limited* version of ordinary anger, easily satisfied.

The other point is that our ideas on this subject are not likely to be unprejudiced, either. They are likely to be influenced by hangovers from Christian tradition, in which the meek are blessed and one should turn the other cheek rather than retaliate. Even if we reject this, we have no very clear idea of what to put in its place. While Philodemus' more detailed positive account will scarcely do, Epicurean ideas on this particular emotion still retain interest for us, and we can only regret that we lack similarly rich Epicurean sources for other emotions.³⁴