

Epicurean Attitudes Toward Emotion

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 11:40 AM

Ok last of my related by somewhat random thoughts: I find discussion of "empty" to be fruitless without a LOT more explanation than is generally given to this issue. No doubt Epicurus had something in mind, but throwing around the word "empty" in our discussions means little, in my view, and appears to be superficial and unhelpful. Pleasure is pleasure, and pain is pain, and an experience of pleasure or pain is in itself never "empty." If what is being meant is that the pain outweighs the pleasure in the end, then that needs to be stated clearly, which "empty" does not convey. But I am not even sure that that is what is meant, as it appears more likely that Epicurus intended it as a synonym for "unnatural," which would require a lot more discussion as to what is meant.

Therefore so as far as i am concerned any modern reference to "empty desire" is more confusing than it is helpful (again, unless much deep explanation is provided). Otherwise, the result is some kind of Platonic idealism of a particular type of desire or action.

I just don't think the modern writers (and possibly Philodemus, depending on what he actually wrote, which is almost impossible to say) are going in the same direction as Epicurus intended. Since we aren't sure what Philodemus or these other writers were arguing about, I would not presume that any of them were wrong; I would say this is an example where we should "wait" to form a judgment about them unless and until we get more texts.

Edit: Referencing the quote below, I would say not only is there no "simple" answer, there is no "complex" answer either, if what is meant by "answer" is a bright line. My reading of the Epicurean viewpoint is that there ARE no bright lines (simple or complex) that apply across groups of people, only individuals in context.

There is no simple answer, according to Philodemus (XXXVII), to the question whether anger is a bad thing or a good. This is because “anger” is used in two ways; in order to avoid fallacy, one must distinguish between “natural anger” (φυσικὴ ὀργή) and “empty anger” (κενὴ ὀργή).⁶ Philodemus does not explain the distinction, though he probably did so in a part of the essay now missing.

The term κενός, literally “empty,” can also mean “futile, pointless” (LSJ *s.v.* I.2); thus the expression “empty anger” for a defective kind of anger is not as striking in Greek as it is in English.⁷ However, contrasting what is empty with what is *natural* is striking, and is bound to remind us, especially in an Epicurean author, of Epicurus’ distinction between natural and empty *desires*:

ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί, καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον· τῶν δὲ ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀσχησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

We should reflect that of desires some are natural, some empty. Of the natural, some are only natural and some are necessary. Of the necessary, some are necessary for happiness, some for comfort of the body, and some for life itself (*Ep. ad Men.* 127).