

Cultivating our own garden [Voltaire Discussion]

Post by "Cassius" of September 17, 2020 at 9:30 AM

Camotero:

First I want to totally agree with you that these issues are contextual, and that each person can only pursue the pleasure that is available to them under their particular circumstances, which includes all sorts of things including health, age, and all the issues of what is going on in surrounding society. So I do not in any way intend to be disapproving of someone who lives a quiet and self-contained life, even subsistence farming as an example, if in fact that is their personal choice and that is all that is open to them.

The main concern that I have which you are seeing is that I think that for most people in most places, a life of subsistence farming is NOT all that is open to most people, nor would most people voluntarily choose to limit themselves to a life of subsistence farming when other options are available. Again, if any individual truly does wish to live that way then I would say more power to them for it, but in my experience that is not the way most people are wired by nature. In my experience most people agree with the formulation from Torquatus as to the best life:

"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

Of course in this context I also always cite Vatican Saying 63: "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess."

To me, the clear implication of knowing that life is short and then for an eternity we no longer exist is that we should use the time we have to achieve the "most pleasure possible." Now of course that needs all kinds of scare quotes and qualifications, because we are also looking to experience as little pain as we can as the price of that pleasure, but all of us as humans are going to experience pain, and we all have to make our own calculation as to what price we are willing to pay to achieve the pleasures we would like to achieve.

There are definitely some people who are so averse to pain of any kind that they are willing to live a life of subsistence farming, valuing tranquility and stillness etc, and if they truly wish to do that then that is the life they "should" pursue so far as I can see under Epicurean philosophy.

But by no means is that life just described the only kind of life that is valid under Epicurean philosophy, because in my experience most people are willing to put up with significant pain in order to achieve significant pleasures. That's the way I see life - when you only go around once, you should enjoy life to the best extent you can. That means doing far more than subsistence farming (my catchall term for the most tranquil life in this discussion) and being willing to accept the effort and pain that such a life requires.

And that leads me to the concern that I observe frequently -- that while it is very easy for me to accept and say that the tranquil subsistence life is fine for those who wish to pursue it, those who think that Epicurus elevated "tranquility" as the highest good are very very disapproving (an understatement) of the idea that pursuing pleasure in the manner described by Torquatus is acceptable under Epicurean philosophy.

And that is my diagnosis of why there is so much reluctance to accept "Pleasure" as the goal set by Epicurus in the normal meaning of that word. And thus one result is that even those who admit that "pleasure" is a term that Epicurus used then resort to redefining "pleasure" so that it means something that is not recognizable to an ordinary person -- they turn it into a variant of stoicism.

So let me comment on "things under our control." Certainly Epicurus held that it is smart not to concern ourselves too much with things that are not under our control. The fact that we are going to die is probably an example, but even there Epicurus didn't advise that we block death from our mind - on the contrary he emphasized that it is important to remember that life is short. Why? For many reasons, but I think that one of the reasons is to remind us to "make hay while the sun shines" -- to pursue pleasure while life is available to us to pursue it.

As to this question:

[Quote from camotero](#)

This confuses me a bit. Why would an Epicurean would think of trying to erect something to replace religion which is, almost by definition, aimed at the masses and with the greatest scope possible, hence making it analogous to "public" work, and something we should refrain of engaging in.

I think that this is the reason that the last ten PD's are devoted to "justice" and to comments on preferred living situations. And it's why Cassius Longinus participated in the Roman Civil War. And it's why Epicurus and the school devoted so much time to pamphleteering and working to expand their circle of friends. It's because humans are social beings, and we get our greatest pleasures, and greatest safety, through associating with like-minded people.

There's nothing intrinsically "wrong" with being like the Turk and essentially sticking his head in the sand in many ways - the problem with his lifestyle in many situations is that the world doesn't leave us alone, and we have to organize our friends to maintain our safety. If we fail to do that, then we are essentially choosing to make no effort whatsoever to effect what IS often at least somewhat within our control. And of course the perils of doing that are clear - we will frequently fall prey to robbers and wars and enemies of all kinds which we might well avoid if we take precautionary action to monitor what is going on around us and - for example - get out of the way of oncoming armies before they strike.

I'll conclude for now by agreeing again that it is impractical and therefore a bad idea to try to "change the world." But the issue of what part of the world we CAN have influence over is very complex and varies by individual, and it seems to me absolutely wrong to imply (as Debotton does, in my view) that there is a single best life for everyone, and that everyone should essentially look for a cave to dwell in.

Exactly what motivates his perspective would be a very speculative thing to pursue, but for now I'm firm in thinking that regardless of what de Botton's motivation may be, what he is describing is not accurate Epicurean philosophy as we can reconstruct it from the historical record.