

A General Thought About The Future Of Epicurean Philosophy - On The Meaning of "Pleasure"

Post by "Cassius" of April 5, 2018 at 7:50 PM

What I need to write on this is a book, and not a short post, but this is all I have time for at present. I reflect a lot about what might be missing from the modern interpretation of Epicurus that explains why some of us can find it so compelling, yet many others find it not worth a second thought. In the ancient world there were MANY who found it compelling, and even more who found it outrageously evil and worth tremendous effort to stamp out.

There are no doubt many factors that explain the discrepancy, but one I find most likely: the narrow meaning and implication assigned to the term "pleasure" in modern discussions of Epicurus.

I think Epicurus intended "pleasure" to include everything in life we find worthwhile - which by Epicurean definition means everything that gives us pleasure of any kind, not just physical but also mental / emotional. If we find something lovable in life, that response within us is a subset of pleasure. That means everything we find in life that is motivational, from art and science to politics and fame (the latter of which are deemed unacceptable in the modern orthodox interpretation) are desirable because they bring pleasure. There are many passages from which it ought to be clear that NOTHING that brings pleasure is undesirable in itself, and it is only in the likelihood (but not certainty!) that some choices will bring inordinate pain that we are well served to avoid them. That means that the decision to pursue any choice in life which we find to be pleasurable can be understood to be consistent with Epicurean philosophy - it is simply up to us to deal with the consequences if we choose unwisely and our choices bring more pain than we anticipated.

I am of the age where I have gradually had to accept that virtually every religious and ethical proposition I was taught when I was growing up in the 60's and 70's was wrong. As an adult, like everyone else, I witness that public discussion (the media) is totally devoid of "objectivity." The truth of *any* significant matter, if it can be found at all, comes only after intense individual study of competing opinions.

Epicurean philosophy is revolutionary because it teaches that the ethical and political norms which we were taught as children were not grounded, as we were taught, in "god" or "absolute truth" or "natural law." In fact they are grounded in NOTHING. Once we accept the Epicurean world view that a life that there IS no absolute justice, or absolute ethical truth, and instead it is the pursuit of pleasure as we find it that is everyone's true goal, we see that there is no reason to conform to existing norms and orthodoxies if they do not bring us happiness. That's the realization that the world is wide open to *our own* decision and action as to how we pursue

our own happiness.

This leads in my mind to the *reverse* of the standard opinion that Epicurean philosophy leads to passivity and withdrawal. Once we grasp the Epicurean insights into the nature of the universe, from which we see that there is no god or central point of reference from which any truth can be deemed absolute, we ought all begin to wake up from our lethargy. Add to that the realization that this is our ONLY life, that for an eternity afterward we will be no more, and that if we don't act to live THIS life to the fullest then there is no god or "force" that will come to our aid, and what do we have? We have a prescription for the most liberating and motivational and *activist* philosophy of life ever invented!

Many in the ancient world saw that, and many adopted that viewpoint, especially the Roman Epicurean examples about which we know the most. But for those Stoics and Religionists who wanted no part of the Epicurean view, we ought to ask ourselves what they would have likely chosen to do in response. What would the more intelligent of them thought to be the most effective way to undercut the philosophy at its start?

I suggest that what the enemies of Epicurus decided to do (remember, he warned against this very thing in the letter to Menoecus) was is to spread the word that Epicurean "pleasure" amounts to nothing more than sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll. Spread the word that love of wives, love of children, love of family, love of friends, love of one's county, love of one's way of life, love of one's own view of art, love of one's own striving to make oneself better - spread the word that THESE were no part of Epicurean philosophy! Spread the word that Epicurus taught that we should do nothing to gain these, or to protect them when we gain them. Spread the word that Epicureans were lazy, good-for-nothing parasites off the main body of the community, contributing nothing to defend it, nothing to keep it going, playing no role in forming or supporting the organizations that can alone keep us safe from enemies both foreign and domestic.

I'll end these thoughts at this point, but I think the lies we see spouted about every political, religious, and philosophical topic today are not new. Not only are they not new, these same attitudes have been working overtime for 2000 years to keep the majority of people "in line" and "in conformity" with groundless orthodoxies that would be blown away by the slightest breeze of reasoned analysis. Remember Alexander the Oracle-Monger - that story is repeated thousands of time daily in the modern world, but there are few who stand up to it in the spirit of Epicurus!

If we're to rediscover the key to what made Epicurean philosophy so successful in the ancient world, and light that flame again today, it's time to rethink and redefine our understanding of "pleasure."