

A Quote from Hobbes' "Leviathan"

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2019 at 5:24 AM

Thanks to D.G. for this quote and question:

I wonder what Epicurus would have thought had he been able to read the following passage in Hobbes' Leviathan:

"Continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call Felicity; I mean the felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetual tranquility of mind, while we live here, because life is but motion, and can never be without desire, nor without fear, no more than without sense."

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2019 at 5:25 AM

The full context can be found at the link below, but I find this passage very interesting and I will comment on it standing alone, even though I have not read the full context. I would want to study parts of it to be more clear, because I would want to see "things" having very broad reference to include all a person's bodily and mental desires, and not just "material goods." I would also want the meaning to refer to the overall effect of experiencing the pleasures of life predominating over the pains of life as the meaning of felicity, because I believe that Epicurus would say that that result is achievable, or is at least a reasonable goal, for most people.

But the part that strikes me as the most important to consider is the "life is but motion and we can never be without desire, nor without fear, no more than without sense." With the caveat that many fears *can* be eliminated or reduced to a minimum, I think this statement does reflect Epicurus' view of the nature of human life. Life is motion from birth to death, and there is never any final rest from motion until death. This is exactly why I think the modern commentator focus on tranquillity cannot be an accurate expression of Epicurus' own views. Epicurus' started with physics and from the nature of the universe derived his ethics, and that nature compels this conclusion.

In terms of not being able to eliminate all pain entirely, I am reminded of this from Diogenes of Oionanda:

"These medicines we have put [fully] to the test; for we have dispelled the fears [that grip] us without justification, and, as for pains, those that are groundless we have completely excised, while those that are natural we have reduced to an absolute minimum, making their magnitude minute."

The goal is to eliminate those which can be eliminated, and to reduce those which are natural and therefore inevitable to an absolute minimum.

The idea that Epicurus was so unrealistic as to think that people can -- or even should - eliminate ALL pain and fear is absurd. That result would be obtainable only by an Epicurean "god" who had so conquered the makeup of its own atomic structure as to be able to constantly regenerate itself, and have confidence in being able to continue to do so into perpetuity. For us humans in our current state of technology, each of us faces the possibility of a painful death through disease or worse, just like Epicurus himself did. Epicurus offset his physical pain with mental pleasure, but he could not eliminate it.

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h68I/chapter6.html>

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2019 at 7:29 AM

AR:

Epicurus would agree that being alive means the triggering of desires that need to be fulfilled for further life, health and happiness.

"We must also consider that some of our human desires are given to us by Nature, and some are vain and empty. Of the Natural desires, some are necessary, and some are not. Of the necessary desires, some are necessary to our happiness, and some are necessary if our body is to be free from trouble. Some desires are in fact necessary for living itself."

He would explain that it's up to us to resolve these toward health and happiness:

He who has a correct understanding of these things will always decide what to choose and what to avoid by referring to the goal of obtaining a body that is healthy and a soul that is free from turmoil, since this is the aim of living happily. It is for the sake of living happily that we do everything, as we wish to avoid grief and fear.

Cassius:

Yes I agree with AR and I should have started by highlighting that, since so many other philosophies and religions argue that eliminating desire should be the goal. Eliminating desire is

perversely anti-Epicurean. It's the desires that lead to more pain than pleasure that should be reduced and if possible eliminated.

The desires that lead to more pleasure than pain are what life is all about. There's probably no better way to sniff out an argument that is anti-Epicurean than discussion which talks generically about elimination of desire being a good thing. And Stoicism is riddled through and through with that.

Also, the advice of Epicurus to the young man about reducing his desire for sex, or the advice to anyone about restraining desires, does not in any way contradict that.

The foundation that the desire for pleasure is natural and what life is all about was laid at a much more basic level, and that foundation is not contradicted by observing that *some* desires lead to more pain than pleasure.

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2019 at 9:29 AM

I think that *equanimity* more so than *tranquility* is the right perspective. Situations can be tranquil (or not) for a time, but change is inevitable and so is death. Talk of equanimity will, of course, smack of the portico; but this is precisely where the Stoics go wrong. Their focus on equanimity as a *virtue* leads to a logjam of pessimism. Pleasure is the freshet that lifts the jam and clears the river.

Robert Burns has an [excellent poem](#) on the subject. (There are anglicized versions available, but I encourage readers to acquaint themselves with his Scottish dialect. This is one of those passages that comes back to me when I need it in life.)

-josh

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2019 at 10:08 AM

Yes agreed! good poem!

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 to 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.

Post by “Cassius” of August 15, 2019 at 10:38 AM

I'm not an expert by any means on Hobbes so I am sure at some point we meet with fundamental divergence from Epicurus -- Hobbes is not known as an Epicurean, to my understanding, so somewhere he goes off in another direction.

David I think you're getting to the issue that Epicurus seems to describe as the "confident expectation" of continuing to experience pleasurable living. Certainly we do need to prepare for hunger in the future by planting crops in the spring, etc.

Desire isn't a bad thing at all - it's natural and in fact the desire for pleasure is THE motivating force of all life, as stated in many ways through the Epicurean texts.

"Contentment" can never be stretched in Epicurean terms to the point where we say. "OK I've lived a happy life til this point, I think I'll choose to die now." because that would be perverse.

From the letter to Menoeceus I think it is clear that life is desirable and it is unnatural and perverse to choose to die before it becomes necessary: "The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It would be easy for him to do so once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in jest, his words are foolishness as those who hear him do not believe. "

I worry a little bit that some people are perceiving a tension between "absence of pain" and proper desires as to lifespan. I don't think Epicurus said at all that it is unnatural or undesirable to live as long as possible. We can and do wish to continue living as long as our minds and bodies are sustainable in a position of net pleasure, and there is nothing wrong with that even under the Epicurean formulas.

It's really Stoic / Platonic / JudeoChristian pollution which causes us to think in terms of living "forever" or reaching some plateau of perfection that once we reach it, that plateau is the equivalent of living forever, or living in a state of divinity.

I don't see anything in Epicurus which deviates from the common sense approach: we live minute by minute as long as our circumstances allow. We can direct our attention at any time to the past, present, or future, but all we can really control is our current level of pleasure and pain at the current moment of experience. And we should wish to continue to prolong our lives as long as we can reasonably expect that those current moments of experience will be, or will return to being, net pleasurable.

Just because we don't NEED to live forever in order to live a fulfilled life, that's no reason that we don't want to continue to live as long as possible while conditions allow us to experience net pleasure.

Otherwise we would be saying "That six day old baby need not want to live a moment longer, because it has already experienced pure pleasure." That would be absurd.

But the same observation applies whether the person is six days old or sixty years old.

Why did these arguments about "pure pleasure" or "limit of pleasure" that can at times seemingly trip us up even arise? Because they are necessary in order to respond to dialectical trickery, for those who for whatever reason need to play that game or respond to it.