

VS11 - Translation and Commentary: VS 11

Post by "Don" of March 12, 2020 at 12:28 AM

τῶν πλείστων ἀνθρώπων τὸ μὲν ἡσυχάζον ναρκᾶ, τὸ δὲ κινούμενον λυττᾶ.

This is an interesting fragment. It's import, at least for me, was not initially apparent. Then I read the other thread in this topic and became intrigued. If we dive into the original Greek, we find some interesting things. To take the first phrase:

τῶν πλείστων ἀνθρώπων

simply means "the greatest number of people" or "the majority of people." So, what we're going to be discussing are most people, not a select few, i.e., not sages, not Epicureans, but the hoi polloi.

μὲν and **δὲ** simply connect phrases and can in some senses be translated something like "On the one hand... on the other hand..." or just "but." It sets up a contrast. So, let's take the other two phrases without them.

τὸ ἡσυχάζον ναρκᾶ

"Being still, being at rest, being quiet is '**ναρκᾶ**'" which means "numbness, deadness, to be in a stupor." Consider that **ναρκᾶ narka** is related to English "narcotic" and "narcolepsy."

τὸ κινούμενον λυττᾶ.

Consider the meanings of **κινούμενον**, the participle form of the verb **κινέω**:

- to set in motion, move, remove
- (grammar) to inflect
- to meddle
- to change, innovate
- to begin, cause
- to urge on, stir on
- to arouse, exasperate, anger, taunt, abuse
- (passive) to be moved, to stir, to move

So "being in motion, moving (contrasting with **τὸ ἡσυχάζον**) is '**λυττᾶ**'" which connotes "rage, fury; mania, raging madness; fanaticism" or even "rabies (of dogs)!" Again, this sets up a contrast with **ναρκᾶ**.

So, an alternative translation could be:

For the majority of people, being at rest is to be in a stupor and numb; but being active is to be raving like a rabid dog.

It seems to me to be saying that there needs to be a balance in rest and activity or that stillness isn't seen to be important by most people. Implying that stillness and rest *are* important for the Epicureans. "Most people" think being still is like being under the effect of a narcotic (to put a modern twist on it). Additionally, when "most people" are active, they're just running around raving in a mania to be just simply doing something, they can't be alone with their own thoughts, they can't be still and taking pleasure in rest. Likewise, they can't take pleasure in activity either. They're just raging around manically like they have an advanced case of rabies!

[The Epicurus Wiki also has a good commentary on this saying.](#)

Post by "Cassius" of March 12, 2020 at 6:54 AM

Great analysis thank you!

Post by "Elayne" of March 14, 2020 at 12:15 AM

Interesting-- I thought he was saying that most people don't do either rest or activity pleasurable, rather than that rest was preferable. For pleasure you would do best to rest or sleep when tired and be active when activity is more pleasurable. People get sore when they sit around all day, and it feels good to take a walk.

A person who doesn't realize pleasure requires getting out of bed in the morning would be in a stupor... a person who doesn't realize pleasure requires taking breaks and also sleeping could get manic. A certain percentage of the population does get hypomania when sleep deprived.

If the person can remember that neither rest nor activity is the main goal but only a means to pleasure, then that person could enjoy both.

Post by "Don" of March 14, 2020 at 12:39 AM

[Elayne](#) , I would concur with your post. I hope I didn't imply "*rest was preferable.*" I would agree that Epicurus is saying "most people" don't know how to be at rest or how to be active. An Epicurean should be able to find pleasure in both stillness/rest and activity/motion. So, an alternative translation, taking advantage of the stereotypical translation of $\mu\epsilon\nu\dots\delta\epsilon\dots$ would be:

On the one hand, for the majority of people, being at rest is to be in a stupor and numb; on the other hand, being active for them is to be raving like a rabid dog.

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2020 at 5:52 AM

On rereading the post I can see why Elayne reacted the way she did, but I read the key as being in the last paragraph where I thought Eugenios [edit - now Don] was dealing with *both* rest and action. Definitely I would not want to imply either that "*rest*" was preferable. I am definitely guilty of "skimming" when I read sometime, and I didn't look up the Epicurus wiki post, but I think we're all mostly and maybe totally together on this - the saying is aimed at how most people botch both rest and activity because they do not prudently follow pleasure as the guide of life.

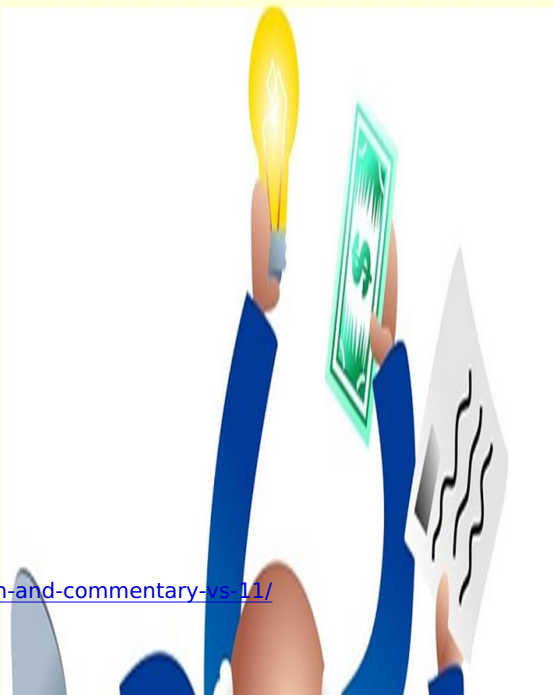
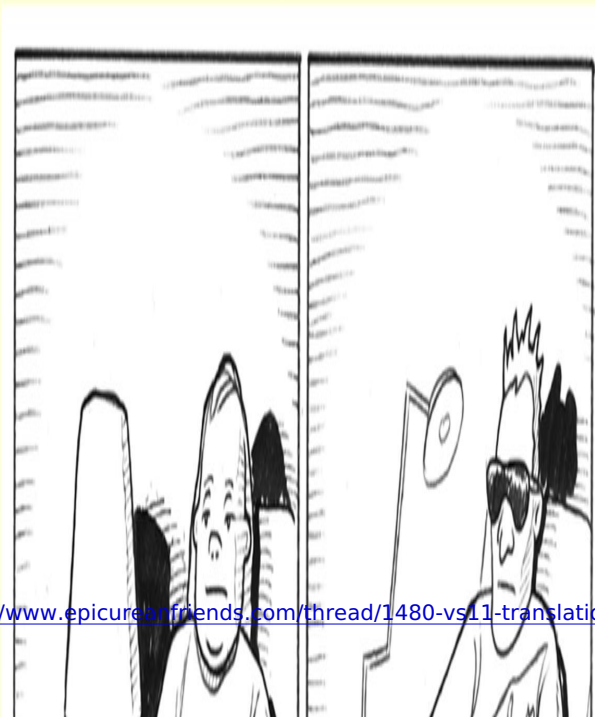
Post by "Elli" of March 18, 2020 at 2:14 PM

For this ES 11, I've created a graphic long time ago.

Epicurus VS11: For most men rest is “lethargy” and activity is “mania”.

11. Τῶν πλείστον ἀνθρώπων τὸ μὲν ἡσύχαζον ναρκᾶ, τὸ δὲ κινούμενον λῦττα.

(Ἐπίκουρος)



Post by “Cassius” of May 3, 2023 at 9:40 PM

Tonight in our Wednesday meeting Fernando brought this up, and I did not remember that we had discussed this one and had Don's commentary already.

Seems like this is one that bears on the question "What are we doing while we are tranquil / calm / serene?"

Post by “Onenski” of May 4, 2023 at 12:14 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus is saying "most people" don't know how to be at rest or how to be active. An Epicurean should be able to find pleasure in both stillness/rest and activity/motion.

I totally agree with this interpretation, [Don](#) .

Today I shared with [Cassius](#), [Kalosyni](#) and [Joshua](#) that it's interesting that rest and motion in VS 11 are related to the two typical (mis)interpretations of epicureanism: in one hand, we have those who say that epicureanism is like cirenaicism, a constant and endless search for pleasures (you know, sex, drugs and rock & roll) and, in the other hand, the ascetics who say that Epicurus was *just* following the tranquility, or calmness.

Evidently, those who (mis)interpret epicureanism in any of those ways commit a similar mistake that people in the case of rest and motion. Life contains both rest and motion and epicureanism understands that and gives tools to find pleasures in them.

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 14, 2023 at 7:42 PM

My take on this one:

For most people when they rest they are either sleeping or in a state of drowsiness, and when they are active then they are rushing around frantically trying to get as much done as possible. So then a much more pleasant state is to calmly take action in a deliberate and focused manner (neither in a dull state of mind nor a in frantic state of mind).