

The Meaning of the Greek Word "Ataraxia"

Post by "Cassius" of December 3, 2023 at 11:07 AM

"Ataraxia" is a key term in Epicurean philosophy. What exactly does it mean? There seems to be a consensus that it translates to "absence of disturbance," but is this a reference to bodily disturbance, to mental disturbance, to both, or with other connotations? How is "disturbance" different from "pain?" This thread is for discussion of the meaning of "Ataraxia," including citations to reference where the term appears in Epicurean texts.

[ἀταραξία - Ancient Greek \(LSJ\)](#)

Ion. ἀταραξίη, ἢ, [impassiveness](#), [calmness](#), [ataraxia](#), [unperturbedness](#), [imperturbability](#), [equanimity](#), [tranquility](#) Democr. ap. Stob.2.7.3i, Hp.Ep.12, Epicur.Ep.1p.30U., Phld.Oec.p.63 J., Cic.Fam.15.19.2, Hero Bel.71.2, Plu.2.101b, Plot. 1.4.1, etc.; prob. [f.l.](#) for [ἀταξία](#) in Hp.Praec.14.

For the time being - Elli's vocabulary list -- which is excellent - but which unfortunately we cannot expect most new people to have access to:

Vocabulary of the greek words as used by Epicurus in his letter to Meneoceus.

- Ευδαιμονία [**eudaemonía**] = well being or happiness synonym with the word «makariótita» - a description of the goal of pleasure as a natural consequence that occurs in a person **who pursues pleasure**.
- Μακαριότητα [**makariótita**] = well being synonym with the word «eudaemonía» - description of the goal of pleasure as a natural consequence that occurs in a person **who pursues pleasure**.
- Αταραξία [**ataraxía**] = without disturbance or without anxiety - description of the goal of pleasure as a natural consequence that occurs in a person **who pursues pleasure**.
- Απονία [**aponía**] = without pain - description of the goal of pleasure as a natural consequence that occurs in a person **who pursues pleasure**.
- Ηδονή [**hedoné**] = pleasure.
- Άλγος [**álgos**] = pain.
- Ταραχή [**taraché**] = disturbance or anxiety.
- Αγαθό [**agathó**] = good.
- Αρχήν [**archín**] = the beginning, or the start.
- Τέλος [**télos**] = end or aim or goal.
- Αυτάρκεια [**autárkeia**] = self sufficiency.
- Φρονήσις [**phroneses**] = prudence.
- Αρετές [**aretés**] = virtues, **the means for the goal of pleasure**.



Post by “Cassius” of December 3, 2023 at 7:13 PM

[From a prior post by Don:](#)

[Feb 19th 2023](#)

[#2](#)

ΑΤΑΡΑΞΙΑ (Ataraxia and related terms: Note that αταραξια is literally "ataraksia" even though the usual English spelling is "ataraxia." Therefore, words that have atarak- are directly related.

From ἀ- (a-, “not”) + ταραάσσω (tarássō, “trouble, disturb”) + -ῖα (-iā); Antonyms: τᾶρᾶχή (tarakhé)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀτα^ρ-αξία](#)

[PD17](#) One who acts aright is utterly steady and serene, whereas one who goes astray is full of trouble and confusion. (Peter Saint-Andre)

ὁ δίκαιος ἀταρακτότατος, ὁ δ' ἄδικος πλείστης ταραχῆς γήμων.

NOTE: ἀταρακτότατος means "utterly without disturbance" and by extension steady or serene, whereas πλείστης ταραχῆς means full of trouble, disorder, or tumult (expanded here to "full of trouble and confusion"; see also [PD22](#)

VS79 He who is as peace within himself also causes no trouble for others. (Peter Saint-Andre)

ὁ ἀτάραχος ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἑτέρῳ ἀόχλητος.

Fragment 519. The greatest fruit of justice is serenity.

δικαιοσύνης καρπὸς μέγιστος ἀταραξία.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus (DL 10.53; Hicks via Perseus): "Again, we must believe that smelling,⁸¹ like hearing, would produce no sensation, were there not particles conveyed from the object which are of the proper sort for exciting the organ of smelling, some of one sort, some of another, some exciting it confusedly and strangely, others quietly and agreeably.

"Καὶ μὴν καὶ τὴν ὁσμὴν νομιστέον, ὡσπερ καὶ τὴν ἀκοὴν οὐκ ἂν ποτε οὐθὲν πάθος ἐργάσασθαι, εἰ μὴ ὄγκοι τινὲς ἦσαν ἀπὸ τοῦ πράγματος ἀποφερόμενοι σύμμετροι πρὸς τοῦτο τὸ αἰσθητήριον κινεῖν, οἱ μὲν τοῖοι τεταραγμένως καὶ ἀλλοτρίως, οἱ δὲ τοῖοι ἀταράχως καὶ οἰκείως ἔχοντες.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus (DL 10.80; Hicks via Perseus): [80] we must not suppose that our treatment of these matters fails of accuracy, so far as it is needful to ensure our tranquillity and happiness (Don Note: lit. blessedness "makarion" - same word used for the gods). When, therefore, we investigate the causes of celestial and atmospheric phenomena, as of all that is unknown, we must take into account the variety of ways in which analogous occurrences happen within our experience ; while as for those who do not recognize the difference between what is or comes about from a single cause and that which may be the effect of any one of several causes, overlooking the fact that the objects are only seen at a distance, and are moreover ignorant of the conditions that render, or do not render, peace of mind impossible -- all such persons we must treat with contempt. If then we think that an event could happen in one or other particular way out of several, we shall be as tranquil when we recognize that it actually comes about in more ways than one as if we knew that it happens in this particular way.

[80] οὐ δεῖ νομίζειν τὴν ὑπὲρ τούτων χρεῖαν ἀκρίβειαν μὴ ἀπειληφέναι, ὅση πρὸς τὸ ἀτάραχον καὶ μακάριον ἡμῶν συντείνει. ὥστε παραθεωροῦντας ποσαχῶς παρ' ἡμῖν τὸ ὅμοιον γίνεται, αἰτιολογητέον ὑπὲρ τε τῶν μετεώρων καὶ παντὸς τοῦ ἀδήλου, καταφρονοῦντας τῶν οὔτε τὸ μοναχῶς ἔχον ἢ γινόμενον γνωρίζοντων οὔτε τὸ πλεοναχῶς συμβαῖνον, τὴν ἐκ τῶν ἀποστημάτων φαντασίαν παριδόντων,¹²¹ ἔτι τε ἀγνοούντων καὶ ἐν ποίοις οὐκ ἔστιν ἀταρακτῆσαι <καὶ ἐν ποίοις ὁμοίως ἀταρακτῆσαι.>¹²² ἂν οὖν οἰώμεθα καὶ ὡδί πως ἐνδεχόμενον αὐτὸ γίνεσθαι, αὐτὸ τὸ ὅτι πλεοναχῶς γίνεται γνωρίζοντες, ὡσπερ κἂν ὅτι ὡδί πως γίνεται εἶδωμεν, ἀταρακτῆσομεν.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus (DL 10.82; Hicks via Perseus): [82] But mental tranquillity means being released from all these troubles and cherishing a continual remembrance of the highest and most important truths.

[82] ἡ δὲ ἀταραξία τὸ τούτων πάντων ἀπολελύσθαι καὶ συνεχῆ μνήμην ἔχειν τῶν ὅλων καὶ κυριωτάτων.

Epicurus, Letter to Pythocles (DL 10.85; Hicks via Perseus): "In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm conviction.

"Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν μὴ ἄλλο τι τέλος ἐκ τῆς περὶ μετεώρων γνώσεως εἶτε κατὰ συναφὴν λεγομένων εἶτε αὐτοτελῶς νομίζειν εἶναι ἥπερ ἀταραξίαν καὶ πίστιν βέβαιον, καθάπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν.

Epicurus, Letter to Pythocles (DL 10.96; Hicks via Perseus): [96] For in all the celestial phenomena such a line of research is not to be abandoned ; for, if you fight against clear evidence, you never can enjoy genuine peace of mind.

[96] ἐπὶ πάντων γὰρ τῶν μετεώρων τὴν τοιαύτην ἴχνευσιν οὐ προετέον. ἦν γὰρ τις ἢ μαχόμενος τοῖς ἐναργήμασιν, οὐδέποτε δυνήσεται ἀταραξίας γνησίου μεταλαβεῖν.

Epicurus, On Choices and Avoidances (DL10.136; Hicks revised slightly by [Don](#) to be more literal, via Perseus): And Epicurus in his work On Choice states in this manner: "Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest ; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity."

ὁ δ' Ἐπίκουρος ἐν τῷ Περὶ αἰρέσεων οὕτω λέγει: "ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀταραξία καὶ ἀπονία καταστηματικά εἰσιν ἡδοναί: ἡ δὲ χαρὰ καὶ ἡ εὐφροσύνη κατὰ κίνησιν ἐνεργεῖα βλέπονται."

Epicurus, Letter to Menoikeus 128 ([Don](#) translation):

[128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind* since this is the goal of a blessed life.

[128] τούτων γὰρ ἀπλανῆς θεωρία πᾶσαν αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν ἐπανάγειν οἶδεν ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ὑγίειαν καὶ τὴν <τῆς ψυχῆς> ἀταραξίαν, ἐπεὶ τοῦτο τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν ἐστὶ τέλος.

*NOTE: I added the parenthetical phrase "that is for our physical and our mental existence," at this point in my translation to clarify and paraphrase the previous phrases.

I would also include citations to γαληνίζω (galēnizō) and related terms as synonyms for ataraxia:

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus (DL 10.37): [37] "Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this"

37] "Ὅθεν δὴ πᾶσι χρησίμησ' οὕσης τοῖς ὠκειωμένοις φυσιολογία τῆς τοιαύτης ὁδοῦ, παρεγγυῶν τὸ συνεχὲς ἐνέργημα ἐν φυσιολογία καὶ τοιούτῳ μάλιστα ἐγγαληνίζων τῷ βίῳ ἐποίησά σοι ...

ἐγγαληνίζω τῷ βίῳ, "spend life calmly" from γαληνίζω

A.calm, still, esp. waves or winds, Hp.Vict.3.71, E.Fr.1079.

2. intr., become calm, prob. in Hp. Morb.Sacr.13; to be calm or tranquil, Alex.178.6, Ph.1.354; "τὸ γαληνίζον τῆς θαλάττης" Arist.Pr.936a5:—so in Med., Xenocr. ap. Orib.2.58.98.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus (DL 10.83, last line of the letter):

"It is of such a sort that those who are already tolerably, or even perfectly, well acquainted with the details can, by analysis of what they know into such elementary perceptions as these, best prosecute their researches in physical science as a whole ; while those, on the other hand, who are not altogether entitled to rank as mature students can in silent fashion and as quick as thought run over the doctrines most important for their peace of mind."

"Τοιαῦτα γὰρ ἐστίν, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς κατὰ μέρος ἤδη ἐξακριβοῦντας ἱκανῶς ἢ καὶ τελείως, εἰς τὰς τοιαύτας ἀναλύοντας ἐπιβολάς, τὰς πλείστας τῶν περιοδειῶν ὑπὲρ τῆς ὅλης φύσεως ποιεῖσθαι: ὅσοι δὲ μὴ παντελῶς τῶν ἀποτελουμένων εἰσίν, ἐκ τούτων καὶ κατὰ τὸν ἄνευ φθόγγων τρόπον τὴν ἅμα νοήματι περίοδον τῶν κυριωτάτων πρὸς γαληνισμόν ποιοῦνται."

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, γα^λην-ισμός](#)

It would also be instructive to include variations on the word ταραχή (tarakhē; "trouble", "disorder", or "tumult") since that forms the root of ataraxia ("no trouble", "no disorder", or "no tumult")

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, τα^ρα^χή](#)

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus. (DL 10.77): [77] For troubles and anxieties and feelings of anger and partiality do not accord with bliss, but always imply weakness and fear and dependence upon one's neighbours. Nor, again, must we hold that things which are no more than globular masses of fire, being at the same time endowed with bliss, assume these motions at will. Nay, in every term we use we must hold fast to all the majesty which attaches to such notions as bliss and immortality, lest the terms should generate opinions inconsistent with this majesty. Otherwise such inconsistency will of itself suffice to produce the worst disturbance in our minds. Hence, where we find phenomena invariably recurring, the invariableness of the recurrence must be ascribed to the original interception and conglomeration of atoms whereby the world was formed.

[77] ἀφθαρσίας ὄου γὰρ συμφωνοῦσιν πραγματεῖαι καὶ φροντίδες καὶ ὄργαι καὶ χάριτες μακαριότητα, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ καὶ φόβῳ καὶ προσδεήσει τῶν πλησίων ταῦτα γίγνεται, μήτε αὖ πυρὸς ἀνάμματα συνεστραμμένου τὴν μακαριότητα κεκτημένα κατὰ βούλησιν τὰς κινήσεις ταύτας λαμβάνειν: ἀλλὰ πᾶν τὸ σέμνωμα τηρεῖν, κατὰ πάντα ὀνόματα φερόμενον ἐπὶ τὰς τοιαύτας ἐννοίας, ἵνα μηδ' ὑπεναντία ἐξ αὐτῶν <γένωνται> τῷ σεμνώματι δόξαι: εἰ δὲ μή, τὸν μέγιστον τάραχον ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς αὐτῆ ἢ ὑπεναντιότης παρασκευάσει. ὅθεν δὴ κατὰ τὰς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐναπολήψεις τῶν συστροφῶν τούτων ἐν τῇ τοῦ κόσμου γενέσει δεῖ δοξάζειν καὶ τὴν ἀνάγκην ταύτην καὶ περίοδον συντελεῖσθαι.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus. (DL 10.78):

"Ἐτι τε οὐ τὸ πλεοναχῶς ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον καὶ ἄλλως πως ἔχειν, ἀλλ' ἀπλῶς μὴ εἶναι ἐν ἀφθάρτῳ καὶ μακαρίᾳ φύσει τῶν διάκρισιν ὑποβαλλόντων ἢ τάραχον μηθέν: καὶ τοῦτο καταλαβεῖν τῇ διανοίᾳ ἔστιν ἀπλῶς εἶναι.

"Further, we must recognize on such points as this no plurality of causes or contingency, but must hold that nothing suggestive of conflict or disquiet is compatible with an immortal and blessed nature. And the mind can grasp the absolute truth of this.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus. (DL 10.81): [81] "There is yet one more point to seize, namely, that the greatest anxiety of the human mind arises through the belief that the heavenly bodies are blessed and indestructible, and that at the same time they have volitions and actions and causality inconsistent with this belief ; and through expecting or apprehending some everlasting evil, either because of the myths, or because we are in dread of the mere insensibility of death, as if it had to do with us ; and through being reduced to this state not by conviction but by a certain irrational perversity, so that, if men do not set bounds to their terror, they endure as much or even more intense anxiety than the man whose views on these matters are quite vague.

[81] "Ἐπὶ δὲ τούτοις ὅλως ἅπασιν ἐκεῖνο δεῖ κατανοεῖν, ὅτι τάραχος ὁ κυριώτατος ταῖς ἀνθρωπίναις ψυχαῖς γίνεται ἐν τῷ ταῦτά τε μακάρια δοξάζειν <εἶναι> καὶ ἀφθαρτα, καὶ ὑπεναντίας ἔχειν τούτῳ βουλήσεις ἅμα καὶ πράξεις καὶ αἰτίας, καὶ ἐν τῷ αἰώνιον τι δεινὸν αἰεὶ προσδοκᾶν ἢ ὑποπτεύειν κατὰ τοὺς μύθους εἶ τε καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν ἀναισθησίαν τὴν ἐν τῷ τεθνάναι φοβουμένους ὡσπερ οὔσαν κατ' αὐτούς, καὶ ἐν τῷ μὴ δόξαις ταῦτα πάσχειν ἀλλ' ἀλόγῳ γέ τι παραστάσει, ὅθεν μὴ ὀρίζοντας τὸ δεινὸν τὴν ἴσην ἢ καὶ ἐπιτεταμένην ταραχὴν λαμβάνειν τῷ εἰκαίως δοξάζοντι ταῦτα:

(NOTE: This directly precedes section DL 10.82 cited above and below.)

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus. (DL 10.82): For by studying them we shall rightly trace to its cause and banish the source of disturbance and dread, accounting for celestial phenomena and for all other things which from time to time befall us and cause the utmost alarm to the rest of mankind.

ἂν γὰρ τούτοις προσέχωμεν, τὸ ὄθεν ὁ τάραχος καὶ ὁ φόβος ἐγίνετο ἐξαιτιολογήσομεν ὀρθῶς καὶ ἀπολύσομεν, ὑπὲρ τε μετεώρων αἰτιολογοῦντες καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν ἀεὶ παρεμπιπτόντων, ὅσα φοβεῖ τοὺς λοιποὺς ἐσχάτως.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoikeus, (DL 10.131, [Don](#) translation):

Therefore, whenever we say repeatedly that "pleasure is the τέλος," we do not say the pleasure of those who are prodigal like those who are ignorant, those who don't agree with us, or those who believe wrongly; but we mean that which neither pains the body nor troubles the mind.

Ὅταν οὖν λέγωμεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὡς τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ μήτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μήτε ταραττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν.

[PD22](#) (Peter Saint-Andre) You must reflect on the fundamental goal and everything that is clear, to which opinions are referred; if you do not, all will be full of trouble and confusion.

τὸ ὑφ'esτηκὸς δεῖ τέλος ἐπιλογίζεσθαι καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐνάργειαν, ἐφ' ἣν τὰ δοξαζόμενα ἀνάγομεν· εἰ δὲ μὴ πάντα ἀκρισίας καὶ ταραχῆς ἔσται μεστά.

NOTE: Here the translated phrase "trouble and confusion" reflects the Greek words ἀκρισία (literally "indistinctness") and ταραχή (literally "trouble", "disorder", or "tumult"); see also Principal Doctrine #17 and the note thereto.

NOTE: This is not necessarily an exhaustive list as the writings of Philodemus and Metrodorus may yield more citations, but they are not as readily searched as the sources above.

Post by "Don" of December 3, 2023 at 10:34 PM

Thanks for re-posting that! I forgot I had put that list together. I was literally thinking today that I needed to do it for this thread.

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2023 at 7:52 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I forgot I had put that list together. I was literally thinking today that I needed to do it for this thread.

Glad I was able to find it.

This time for this thread too let's examine the question of:

"Should we generally see "ataraxia" as meaning pain of mind and "aponia" meaning pain of body?"

If not, what is the relationship between these words when referring to body and mind?

Can we have "ataraxia" of the body? Can we have "aponia" of the mind?

And since Epicurus does regularly use words in a different way, I suppose the question breaks down into:

1 - In what way did the Greeks "in general" use these two words? and

2 - In what way did Epicurus use them?

Still focusing I think on being clear about this distinction:

Does ataraxia always refer to the mind and does aponia always refer to the body? Can we have "ataraxia" of the body? Can we have "aponia" of the mind?