

"A Dilemma For Epicureanism" (Comments On An Article Critical of the Epicurean view of death)

Post by "Cassius" of April 15, 2018 at 6:45 PM

The article at this link was posted to the facebook group, it is entitled ["A Delimma For Epicureanism" by Travis Timmerman](#).

Here is the response I wrote to the initial post. As per my comment on Facebook, if someone can get something worthwhile to discuss out of this, please post further in clear terms so we won't all waste our times. At this point I consider the article a waste, but I will be happy to be educated otherwise. Here is my response to the post:

I trust Hiram that you do not think this is an *effective* refutation? I am going to edit this response as I read through the article.

(1) My first comment after reading the first few pages is that this kind of dialectical hairsplitting and is why philosophy has a bad name, and why Epicurus said that it is of no use if it does not help us toward living more happily.

(2) This is all I need to read: " I do not discuss ancient Epicureans, such as Lucretius or Epicurus, since historical interpretations of their work are contentious and because I do not need to take a stand on the correct interpretation of their positions for the purposes of my argument."

I am not going to waste my time reading through dialectical word games splitting hairs with "modern Epicureans." If someone reads through this gibberish and can articulate that there are worthwhile points to be addressed, please do so without resort to "ED" "PL" "DD" and similar verbal gamesmanship, and we will all profit from the exercise. As written, I believe this article to be a waste of time for the members of our group.

However, I can see this article has one redeeming benefit: it shows how worthless much of modern scholarship on something as important as the Epicurean view of death has become. If you are a new student of Epicurus go straight to DeWitt and get a grounding in what Epicurus is all about before you waste your time with something like this.

Remember this from an Epicurean rant from Seneca:

"And on this point, my excellent Lucilius, I should like to have those subtle dialecticians of yours advise me how I ought to help a friend, or how a fellowman, rather than tell me in how many

ways the word "friend" is used, and how many meanings the word "man" possesses. Lo, Wisdom and Folly are taking opposite sides. Which shall I join? Which party would you have me follow? On that side, "man" is the equivalent of "friend"; on the other side, "friend" is not the equivalent of "man." The one wants a friend for his own advantage; the other wants to make himself an advantage to his friend. What you have to offer me is nothing but distortion of words and splitting of syllables. It is clear that unless I can devise some very tricky premises and by false deductions tack on to them a fallacy which springs from the truth, I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it! 'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese."

Suppose now that I cannot solve this problem; see what peril hangs over my head as a result of such ignorance! What a scrape I shall be in! Without doubt I must beware, or some day I shall be catching syllables in a mousetrap, or, if I grow careless, a book may devour my cheese! Unless, perhaps, the following syllogism is shrewder still: "'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a syllable does not eat cheese. Therefore a mouse does not eat cheese." What childish nonsense! Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?

Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbor's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy men, sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature."

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Not knowing when I will be able to get back to this topic, I will state this further. Most of the criticisms I see to "[Death is nothing to us](#)" center on the supposed view of Epicurus that it does not matter how long we live. I consider that contention absurd, and do not believe that Epicurus

or Lucretius made it. The essential point of this doctrine in Epicurean philosophy is that there is no afterlife in which to suffer punishment. Period - full stop. To contend that it is of no difference to the living whether die in lingering pain, or quickly, or whether we live for another hour or another hundred years is absurd on its face. There is nothing in the texts that compels the conclusion that Epicurus advised his students to accept such an opinion and such conclusions arise only from cramped and hostile interpretations of Epicurean philosophy..

Such an argument is the best I can deduce from the opening abstract quoted below. Maybe indeed there are "modern Epicureans" who contend such a thing, but I certainly would not. Again, if anyone wants to wade through the jargon and post further on this article, please do.

"Perhaps death's badness is an illusion. Epicureans think so and argue that agents cannot be harmed by death when they're alive (because death hasn't happened yet) nor when they're dead (because they do not exist by the time death comes). I argue that each version of Epicureanism faces a fatal dilemma: it is either committed to a demonstrably false view about the relationship between self-regarding reasons and well-being or it is involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism. I first provide principled reason to think that any viable view about the badness of death must allow that agents have self-regarding reason to avoid (or seek) death if doing so would increase their total well-being. I then show that Epicurean views which do not preserve this link are subject to reductio arguments and so should be rejected. After that, I show that the Epicurean views which accommodate this desideratum are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism."