

General Comment On "One Size Doesn't Fit All" In Epicurean Art

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2019 at 6:23 PM

It seems to me that age/culture barriers largely explain different reactions to art. And that's a subset of the larger and wider fact that while we are all humans and there are definite limits to variation, we do have wide differences between individuals and groups in what we find pleasurable and painful. Even the same song or art can evoke different reactions in the same person depending on whether the things we associate it with change over time.

This is something that probably has to sink in over time, but that we probably ought to highlight. I am convinced that the core of Epicurean philosophy applies to everyone, everywhere, because the basic analysis of nature is correct. But within the scope of humanity there's a huge set of divisions culturally, and if we try to assert that our own variation of pleasure is going to fit everyone we're going to be very disappointed.

Something like this has come up before in discussion of "Eastern" vs "Western" approaches not only in music but in meditation and all sorts of "artistic" preferences. That's why when we started to update the "Epicurean music" playlist we worked on some time ago, it made sense to divide the playlist into styles so that each person can find his or her own preference.

I'm beginning to think that right up there with the jolts that people receive when they hear that Epicureans don't think there's life after death, or supernatural gods, or absolute virtues, we ought to include an item to the effect that "And everybody by Nature isn't going to want to live the same way, or follow the same politics, or economics, or music, or art..." With the emphasis on the point that none of these choices are "better" than any other, but that we all by nature have our own faculties of pleasure and pain, and Nature set us up to pursue them as WE see fit, and not as absolutists think we SHOULD see them.

Also - I don't want this to sound like I am taking a "libertarian" approach that every preference is totally the same. I think the reverse - I, like everyone who is honest, has strong preferences based on my sense of pain and pleasure. All I am saying is that when we rank our preferences we should be honest that our choices aren't sanctioned by gods or absolute ideals. We should all support what we find pleasurable, and avoid what we find painful, all the while being realistic about the reasons for our choices.

Post by "Godfrey" of January 11, 2019 at 7:00 PM

Cassius, this touches on something that I've had on the back burner for awhile. I read an interesting article on "embodied cognition" and put it aside to follow up on (which I've not yet done). Here's a link to the article:

<https://www.citylab.com/design/2017/07...ecture/531810/>

It seems to touch on pleasure and the anticipations if one wants to look at it in a Epicurean context. The book that it refers to in the article is by all accounts quite scholarly and ponderous. There are a couple of lighter books, that I haven't had a chance to read yet, that at first glance seem like they may address similar ideas. "Joyful" by Ingrid Fetell Lee, and "The Architecture of Happiness" by Alain de Botton. This is all very premature from my end but there may be some relevance to your post. Note that these books all deal with design and/or architecture, but there is probably some overlap with art and music for what it's worth....

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2019 at 7:42 PM

Godfrey I definitely think there's a lot to that, and that reminds me of a book that I have - From Bauhaus to Our House by Tom Wolfe - <https://misspreservation.com/2018/05/16/fro...olfe-1930-2018/>

I don't have much of a theory developed yet but I definitely don't think it's "random" what we find pleasurable and what painful. It's pretty easy to conclude that certain physical contacts (like food) could have a very mechanical cause and effect relationship. but given that art is so sophisticated it's hard to imagine how the mechanism of finding something pleasing / painful functions. I gather the Epicureans thought in terms of smooth and rough motions, and maybe there's something to that.

But the issue of how pleasure works, and how it developed "in the first place" deserves a lot of study. And I put "in the first place" in quotes because I am not sure that is a proper question. I tend to think personally that it would not be Epicurean theory to think that there is a "first place" in the "development" of life. If life exists throughout the universe then there is some kind of "eternal" mechanism at work, and presumably that means there may be some kind of "eternal" mechanism of pleasure / pain as well.

That's far beyond the scope of your comment but the bottom line is that there is a lot to the issue of the nature of the pleasure/pain faculty that needs to be explored.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 12, 2019 at 12:39 AM

I confess that I'm an aficionado of modernism and have avoided Tom Wolfe's book for years 😬 . I'll give it a read though! In the linked article the reviewer mentioned "good modernism and bad modernism". One of the criticisms of modernism is an over-reliance on rationality. To me, the best modern design is actually more "Epicurean" in that it embraces both sensuality and rationality. And pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2019 at 4:50 AM

I think years ago I also read the "Painted Word" which goes along with FBTOH but I can hardly remember. I see my thoughts have changed a lot over the years and art theory is something that I don't have well developed thoughts on today.