

Journal of happiness studies article on Epicurus

Post by “Godfrey” of November 27, 2020 at 1:25 AM

I've only read up through section 5.4, but find it quite interesting in that the authors interpret the goal of EP as absence of pain and then show (beginning in 5.4) that modern research invalidates absence of pain as a valid goal. Apparently modern research has validated many of the positions that we tend to take here.

Quote

Pain relief and the escape from expected pain leads to positive affect (e.g. Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991), but continuous absence of pain does not necessarily lead to happy tranquillity, but can also be boring. Headey and Wearing (1992) describe the fact that a significant minority of people have low levels of psychological distress and are unhappy at the same time. Csikszentmihaly (1999) states that happiness results from optimal functioning that can be found between boredom and anxiety. These findings contradict Epicurus' notion of happiness as mere absence of pain. Epicurus' happiness advice does not cater for exhilarating aspects of a business man's life that involves risks and losses but also makes one live to the full and be happy on balance. He also did not think of anhedonia, the inability to experience emotion, that is characteristic of people with a depressive disorder. This condition is often more difficult to bear than emotional pain itself. Happiness is definitely something other than the mere absence of all pain (Bergsma, 1995).

Headey and Wearing (1992, pp. 4–8) also notice that some people are happy despite the fact that they experience high levels of psychological distress. People often perceive life as both quite satisfying and quite stressful. This goes against Epicurus' idea that happiness can be equated with absence of pain. Still, the combination of high distress with happiness can be reconciled with Epicurus' philosophy, because of his idea that we can learn to tolerate pain.

The independence of positive and negative affect has two consequences for Epicurus' position. His notion that avoiding pain is sufficient for establishing a good quality of life may be too conservative. The second consequence is that he neglected the role of positive affect. We start with a discussion of his ideas to avoid pain.

So while I'm not convinced by the authors' interpretation of EP, I'm looking forward to continuing to read how they invalidate the absence of pain interpretation.

Thanks for posting this, Brett!