

The Nature of Work

Post by "Cassius" of February 22, 2021 at 12:40 PM

I think we're now talking about something very similar to what Jordan C raised in regard to ataraxia, and it is a continuing question when you aren't really clear on the nature of the goal and the nature of pleasure:

Quote

Jordan:

What does ataraxia mean exactly? It's usually translated as absence of anxiety. However, Philodemus talks about Epicurean business owners -- and I cannot conceive of a business owner ever being totally free from anxiety. So since Philodemus is not calling for the business-man to sell up and move to a Garden, it must mean that ataraxia has a meaning different to what I'm thinking. I have always taken ataraxia to mean: a total lack of any mental disturbance. Does it mean something else? Something that even a business-man could maintain? Could it mean cheerfulness? Just as an aside: I do NOT want this discussion to devolve into a discussion about whether ataraxia is the aim of Epicurean philosophy. I just want to know what ataraxia really means

Quote

Cassius:

This might be a good post for comment by some of our Greek-speakers. In the meantime, I personally see a couple of issues going on here, and I think that Jordan's question is in fact spurred by the discussion he does not want to have ("whether ataraxia aim of Epicurean philosophy" - the answer to which is that the aim is "pleasure" rather than ataraxia).

The example Jordan gives of Philodemus and the business owner helps illustrate how Jordan is boxed in, because a businessman will never achieve a "total lack of any mental disturbance" any more than anyone else in any other profession. Epicurus tells the businessman as he tells everyone else that sometimes it is best to choose pain, in order to achieve more pleasure in life. Disturbance is a subset of pain, so that's the trap that Jordan is in -- he has set up an intermediate step (ataraxia) in the place of the ultimate goal (pleasure). Therefore he cannot imagine ever choosing disturbance under his viewpoint, since avoiding disturbance is in his view the ultimate goal.

All this is very simple to unwind when you accept the logical framework of Epicurean philosophy. Absence of disturbance (ataraxia) and absence of pain (aponia) are instrumental only - toward **pleasure**, which is the goal. Yes, hypothetically the best way to experience pleasure is without any mixture of pain and without any period of disturbance, but we can and often do choose both pain and disturbance in the goal of achieving the most pleasure that is possible to us.

Loose talk about ataraxia rather than pleasure being the goal of life is a barrier to a full understanding of Epicurus.

Quote

Elayne:

The idea that it is "devolving" the discussion to focus on whether ataraxia is the goal -- that is part of the problem here. Ataraxia is just an absence word, like void. Absence of disturbance does not tell you what replaces it, but we know that Epicurus did not conceive of 3 states-- pain (including anxiety), pleasure, and a void state with neither. So if there is no mental disturbance, the person has to be feeling only pleasure, and pleasure is indeed our goal-- as much pleasure as possible.

When defining ataraxia, I think people get caught in the idea that disturbance includes what is now called "eustress", positive stress, and really most activity, period. That will get people into a very passive mode which is not really conducive to pleasure. For example, I went for a hike yesterday-- it was strenuous exercise, positive stress, but I enjoyed all the aspects of it, both physical and mental. I have sometimes seen commenters here calling exertion a disturbance, but if it is experienced pleurably, that is not correct. The same is true of the mind-- our minds can be active, even exerting ourselves strenuously thinking through business decisions or engaging in business-related social interactions, but if this is felt as a pleasure, then that is what it is, and ataraxia-- freedom from unpleasant disturbance-- would be present even when the person is actively engaging their mind!

Although I agree with [Cassius Amicus](#) that the aspect of sometimes choosing pain for greater pleasure is relevant in your hypothetical, I also note that Epicurus observed he was able to maintain mental pleasure even during great physical pain, by remembering his friendships. I have a hard time thinking he would recommend to anyone that they deliberately take on life long mental pain for greater pleasure, simply because he doesn't talk about any situation where that is the only option. It seems unnecessary, and if taking on lifelong mental pain is not necessary for great pleasure, why would anyone do it? It would be a hypothetical that almost no one would be advised to choose.

I owned a business for several years, and although I occasionally had some anxiety over it, this was rare, because I arranged my business decisions based on evidence of what would be successful and adjusted my actions according to what happened. I was actively engaged in running it, and I found that activity pleasurable.

Note: I am adding Martin K's comment here too:

Quote

[Martin Kalyniuk](#)

Ἄταραξία means what it does — serene state of mind.

No considerations as to its alleged unattainability by a certain class of people can prove otherwise or alter its meaning. Words do not work that way.

Is it it impossible for business-persons? Absolutely not. It is, in fact, its easy achievement that makes late Hellenistic schools of philosophy perennially attractive and particularly today.

Taking things philosophically. Re-aligning one's perspective away from profit or relative financial success as the be-all and end-aim of life. The self-instantiated, repeated, realisation that what feels catastrophic is, in fact, minor on the cosmic scale and you yourself probably won't remember it in two years' time.

This empowers those in business to maintain tranquil and clear-headed amidst the surge of Tyche's toying with us. That is why Epicureanism and Stoicism are presently popular precisely with the business class.

Cassius has also made a great practical point from the Epicurean perspective. Ἄταραξία is instrumental in Epicureanism as well as Stoicism. It is the ultimate goal only of the Pyrrhonic school.

And in Pyrrhonism it has no broader reference to life at large, but rather specifically concerns questions that are (it is claimed) insoluble (i.e: every interesting aporiai).

To be bothered about business affairs is completely compatible with being imperturbable relative to humanity's hardest and trickiest theoretical problems.

Written in the back of an Uber on my way to do high value business transactions

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