

Ruminating on desires and on the absence of pain....

Post by "Don" of June 8, 2021 at 8:04 AM

You're absolutely right that if Epicurus didn't address "everyday fears" there wouldn't be any use to his philosophy. So, that being said, I think you're on track in that we have to assume he did. In my view, Epicurus was adamant that philosophy had to have practical applications for one's whole life; otherwise, it was useless.

In my reading of your post, it seems to me to go back to assessing what will happen if this desire is fulfilled and what if it is not. Your diving example is a good example of this practical application. Philosophy doesn't need to be Capital-P Philosophical. There's no ultimate cosmic outcome either way in jumping. It's not a meaning of life epiphany if you jump or don't jump. BUT (unbeknownst to you at the time), you weighed the benefits of jumping against jumping and found you were curious enough to overcome your fear to see if jumping vs not jumping provided more pleasure. I'm sure there was an aspect of peer pressure too that could have brought some pain. Jumping eliminated that too.

It's important to remember too from that excerpt from the Letter that Epicurus didn't write "happiness" with the baggage that English word has. It's part of it, but the word he used is eudaimonia. I've gone through and pulled out other occurrences to give maybe a better idea what that word means:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia>

VS 33. The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for ****happiness.**** σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔχων τις καὶ ἐλπίζων ἔξειν [hope or expect to have] κἂν <δὲ [dative of Zeus]> ὑπὲρ ****εὐδαιμονίας**** μαχέσαιτο. [contend/compete]

Letter to Menoikeus: Someone who says that the time to love and practice wisdom has not yet come or has passed is like someone who says that the time for ****happiness**** has not yet come or has passed.

ὁ δὲ λέγων ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ὥραν ἢ παρεληλυθῆναι τὴν ὥραν, ὁμοίός ἐστιν τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς ****εὐδαιμονίαν**** ἢ μὴ παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν ἢ μηκέτι εἶναι.

Therefore, you ***must*** study and meditate on those things which produce ****eudaimonia!**** For if that is present, we truly have everything; but if that is not present, we will do everything to have it.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2047-ruminating-on-desires-and-on-the-absence-of-pain/?postID=12510#post12510>

μελετᾶν οὖν χρὴ τὰ ποιῶντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν, εἴπερ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν, ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

Letter to Pythocles: DL X[116]

[116] For such folly as this would not possess the most ordinary being if ever so little enlightened, much less one who enjoys **perfect felicity**.

"All this, Pythocles, you should keep in mind ;

οὐδὲ γὰρ εἰς τὸ τυχὸν ζῶον, κἂν <εἰ> μικρὸν χαριέστερον εἴη, ἢ τοιαύτη μωρία ἐμπέσοι, μὴ ὅτι εἰς παντελῆ **εὐδαιμονίαν** κεκτημένον [acquire, possess, own].

"Ταῦτα δὴ πάντα, Πυθόκλεις, μνημόνευσον:

Laërtius commentary not Epicurus: DL X [121]

[121] Two sorts of **happiness** can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures.

We must now proceed to his letter.

"Epicurus to Menoeceus, greeting.

Τὴν **εὐδαιμονίαν** διχῆ νοεῖσθαι, τὴν τε ἀκροτάτην, οἷα ἐστὶ περὶ τὸν θεόν, ἐπίτασιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν: καὶ τὴν <κατὰ τὴν> προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν ἡδονῶν.

Μετιτέον δ' ἐπὶ τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

"Ἐπίκουρος Μενοικεῖ χαίρειν.

Paragraph directly before DL gives the Kuriai Doxai: Come, then, let me set the seal, so to say, on my entire work as well as on this philosopher's life by citing his *Sovran Maxims*,¹³⁸ therewith bringing the whole work to a close and making the end of it to coincide with the beginning of happiness.

Καὶ φέρε οὖν δὴ νῦν τὸν κολοφῶνα, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, ἐπιθῶμεν τοῦ παντὸς συγγράμματος καὶ τοῦ βίου τοῦ φιλοσόφου, τὰς Κυρίας αὐτοῦ δόξας παραθέμενοι καὶ ταύταις τὸ πᾶν σύγγραμμα κατακλείσαντες, τέλει χρησάμενοι τῇ τῆς **εὐδαιμονίας** ἀρχῇ.

548. **Happiness** and bliss# are produced not by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature. τὸ **εὐδαιμον** καὶ μακάριον οὐ χρημάτων πλῆθος οὐδὲ πραγμάτων ὄγκος οὐδ' ἀρχαί τινες ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀλυπία καὶ πραότης παθῶν καὶ διάθεσις ψυχῆς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὀρίζουσα.

#The same word is used here as the word describing the gods in Principal Doctrine 1 and is usually translated blessed, blissful there.

There's a lot going on and translating it happiness does the word/concept a disservice.

Finally, your point about "

it wouldn't lead him to avoid his work and sit in his room on a zafu cushion" seems to me a non sequitur. Meditation does not mean avoiding work. I'm not soapboxing here, but I see no issue with incorporating meditation ("on a zafu cushion") into an Epicurean practice. It can be a way of bringing clarity to one's mind, calming thoughts, and being better able to assess "what will happen if this desire is fulfilled/unfulfilled" in the moment.

Thanks for the thought-provoking post!!