

An August 2018 Example of the Ascetic View of Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2018 at 6:42 AM

My guess is that of every ten new articles you see on Epicurus, eight of them are going to leave a totally false impression of what Epicurus really taught, such as this one, which makes Epicurus sound like an ascetic competing with stoics and monks to see how many desires he could suppress. And as usual the inaccurate conclusions can be traced back to the single misunderstanding -- the "BUT....." --- that seems to impress ascetics most: "'Epicurus's version agrees that pleasure is the greatest good and the best life is the most pleasant life,'" says James Warren, professor of Classics at Cambridge University. "But he thinks the highest pleasure you can achieve is the absence of pain. Once pain has been removed, you don't increase pleasure from that point on, you just vary it."

Thus the standard way of misrepresenting Epicurus that leads to his embrace by the ascetics and his dismissal by those who have the intelligence to see that this formulation cannot be what Epicurus really taught:

"Pleasure IS the goal of life, but Pleasure ISN'T what you think it is! Pleasure is really a zero!"

On the contrary, what Epicurus taught is that pleasure IS what you (the person uncorrupted by a false philosophy like asceticism) think it is, because you FEEL it and need no academic expert to interpret it for you!

From De Finibus: "This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them."

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