

Commentary on "The Ultimate Tranquilizer"

Post by "Cassius" of September 24, 2018 at 11:14 AM



The Ultimate Tranquilizer: One part Greek philosophy, two parts acceptance of death. Dilute ten drops in water from a duck's back. If symptoms persist, see your local Epicurean. Compound Sedative by Science Museum, London. © by 4.0

Commentary on [The Ultimate Tranquilizer](#) cited by Elli [here](#). Thank you Elli!

To repeat what Elli quoted: "Epicurus characterized the state of ataraxia as the absence of pain and freedom from all worry. He said that the condition in which nothing can discomfort you - whatever that thing is and however distressful it is - can be attained through philosophical contemplation." <<< The goal is to attain a condition in which nothing no matter how distressful can discomfort you???? Epicurus would have known just as surely as we do that the only way for a human to attain such a condition is to DIE -- and so unless DEATH was the Epicurean goal of life this assertion stated this way is

totally bogus and misleading. Such a condition CANNOT be obtained through philosophical contemplation alone, any more than philosophical contemplation can stop a bullet aimed at your head or a cancer aimed at your vital organs.

Among the most important things he is confusing is this: Philosophical contemplation cannot make us superhuman. What philosophical contemplation can first do is to allow us to reason through and see the true goal of life, which is NOT to live for God, NOT to live for virtue, and NOT to live for absolute abstract ideals -- because those things have never existed and will never exist. Correct contemplation of nature and use of reason based on the senses allows us to see that LIFE is our most important asset, and that we are programmed by nature to spend that life pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, and not chasing after nonexistent gods and virtues and absolutes. If we see and identify that goal, we will see that ACTION is necessary in real life to meet and defeat the problems of life -- not just sitting around CONTEMPLATING.

Now its probably also fair to say that Epicurus went further in deconstructing gods and virtues and ideals, and he further postulated that since those things do not exist, we need to define a goal - the kind of life in reality - towards which all our actions are directed. We can define that highest state of existence as that kind of life in which we have in REALITY eliminated pains and threats against us, and that we thereby achieve confidence in our ability to continue in such a state due to our ability to defeat those problems. Complete achievement of that state is what we would presume the life of a "god" would look like, and we can observe that in an infinite and eternal universe, some forms of life are better able to achieve that state in reality than others. So that way of life serves as our "ideal" to which we should strive in ACTION. This is stated clearly in the Epicurean section of "On Ends", where the highest life is described this way:

"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

So there IS a sense in which this end result is accomplished in PART through philosophical means - as the coordinator and driver of our actions. But contemplation divorced from action is the key problem with what is suggested in that article. That is Platonism and other Greek variations - it is not Epicurus.

(Note: I attempted to reduce my use of the word "state" due to the potential confusion that there is some absolute unchanging condition of perfection which is the goal. No! The atoms are forever in motion - NOTHING is ever "at rest." Life is change; life is movement, and to suggest that there is some final mountaintop experience in which a second is as good as an eternity is false. The word "state" *can* imply such an unchanging condition, but it can also be used to describe a continuing progression that continues without significant change. That latter is the way I am using it - NOT as a "one second is worth an eternity" / "salvation" type of experience. Epicurus would never have accepted such a formulation as the goal when the premises of everything is that the atoms of our being - and all atoms - are always and eternally in motion.)

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There are so many issues involved in deconstructing a statement like "ataraxia is the goal of life" which can be viewed as correct from one perspective but totally incorrect from other perspectives. Yes, within a full framework of Epicurean perspectives on the nature of the universe, the nature of the gods, the nature of human life, and the nature of pleasure and pain, it is correct to say that "absence of disturbance" (probably the best translation of ataraxia) is ONE characteristic of the best way of life. But that is not the impression that such a statement leaves on 98% of the people in the world today, or on 95% of the people who read that statement even in this Epicurean group.

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Words don't just have abstract meaning - they convey real conclusions to real people in real contexts - and to convey that "anesthesia" is the goal of Epicurean living is totally misleading. That's not meant as a personal criticism of the writer of this article or of any other example of this type of argument. The problem is that we don't live in an Epicurean world where people

readily grasp the subtleties of the arguments that were used by Epicurus, and if we're going to be responsible to each other and faithful to the intent of Epicurus, we need to realize that drowning men and women don't need technicalities while they are thrashing about in the water -- they need a lifeline of clear help first, and technicalities later.

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The article ends: "And is there anything better than inner peace and tranquility?" And my answer based on my understanding of Epicurus is "DAMN RIGHT THERE IS! And the answer is explained fully in the example of the highest life I have quoted above, in which peace and continuity without painful disturbance are aspects, but far from the whole and far from the core. It is THIS that is the highest life, and this is by no means anesthesia:

"Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

"NOT ADMIT OF FURTHER IMPROVEMENT" means *this* is the goal - not anesthesia!