

Why Tranquility Should Not Be the Main Goal for an Epicurean

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ETHICS

One might agree that such a person has some sort of peace of mind, but what about the positive side of tranquillity, expressed more clearly in the old Democritean term, *euthymia*? Does this not require some sort of positive emotion, rather than no emotion at all? It seems that the Stoics tried to account for this also, not of course by admitting any emotions, but by introducing some sort of positive feelings, called *eupatheiai*, states of being well affected. These go with true value-judgments, such as that someone, oneself or another, has achieved virtue, a real good. That, then, is the Stoic version of contentment. Seneca dwells at great length upon the pleasures (not to be called such, of course)¹⁴ that come with tranquillity, which is treated rather like a virtue. He enthusiastically describes the immense joy and infinite serenity of the person who has finally achieved virtue. The sage will rejoice in a wonderful sense of relief and freedom, realizing that he has reached absolute security – nothing in this world can present a danger for him any more. Thus it turns out that tranquillity, once achieved, may be a source of unending delight. Seneca combines the character-trait of tranquillity with a very positive conception of the corresponding state of mind that may well go beyond orthodox Stoicism. For other Stoics like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the negative term *ataraxia*, absence of disturbance, seems to be dominant. Which makes one wonder whether Seneca is right in claiming that *tranquillitas* is the best Latin rendering of *euthymia*.

I agree with Gisela Striker there too. No matter how much lipstick you put on a pig, a pig is still a pig. "Ataraxia" is (like *aponia*) a *negative* term, and would in my view never be used by Epicurus as the primary way to express and convey the ultimate goal of life.

A negative term suits very well to explain why Plato and Aristotle are wrong in saying that pleasure cannot be the highest good, but a negative term is never going to take the place of *hedone*, or other words like *euthymia*, as the positive way Epicurus would articulate the guide and goal of life.

Call it a matter of style, or tone, or a 'sense of life' issue, but if there is a "Stoic personality" and an "Epicurean personality" (and I would say there probably is) then I would say that the Epicurean personality is going to find much more pleasure and affinity in the "positive" rather than the "negative." Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius just ooze with sourness and negativity and darkness and defeat.