

Tim O'Keefe's "Epicurean Guide To Christmas" (An Article And Responses)

Post by "Cassius" of December 29, 2021 at 2:31 PM

My first comment:

Thanks to Nate for finding and posting this link, and to Elli for her initial responses. This article will likely serve as a good basis for us to discuss once again some of the biggest divisions of opinion among those who are fans of Epicurus.

In general, I will say that articles and books by Tim Okeefe and James Warren contain lots of excellent citations to source material. They and others like them are professionals who have studied these issues all their adult lives and they have access to a wider scope of information, and academic resources, than do most of us who aren't professional philosophers.

That said, opinions such as are stated in this article are open to challenge and discussion no matter who writes them (including us). Regular readers of this group will know that there are opposing camps as to how best to interpret Epicurus' "tranquility" references. This article by OKeefe shows that he is definitely in the "Tranquillist"camp. Here his own words:

"So while it's right to call the Epicureans hedonists, insofar as they believe that our goal is to live a life of pleasure, given their idiosyncratic conception of what pleasure is, it might be less misleading to call them "tranquillists."

I would argue in response that Epicurus would have objected strongly to that changing of the focus from "pleasure" to "tranquility," and that attempting to do so mutates Epicurus' true teachings into a version of "Stoicism-lite." In fact "Stoicism-lite" is a theme that I think astute readers will find throughout Okeefe's article. interestingly enough, however, more so in the synopsis (written by someone besides Okeefe?) rather than in the details of the article;

"The Epicureans would do Christmas very differently than most people assume. ... But for them that didn't involve lavish meals and copious amounts of drink. ... Instead, they emphasized the psychological pleasure of tranquility and the pleasures of friendship. They would be at home with Christmas gatherings and the practice of giving thoughtful gifts to loved ones. They could even stretch to celebrating Jesus Christ as a God, if that meant looking at him as a role model to aspire to, not as a source of salvation and guarantee of an afterlife, writes Tim O'Keefe. "

Whether or not Okeefe intends this to be a summary of his work, I would strongly object to the view that Epicureans didn't value good food and drink or that that they emphasize "tranquility" over pleasure as normally defined. Even in this summary there is contradiction - many of our most important friendships can hardly be described as "tranquil"! So which is it tranquility or

friendship?? Thus are the contradictions that arise when we think that Epicurus decided to adopt a tricky definition of "pleasure." But to suggest that devoted classical Epicureans would celebrate "Jesus Christ as a God" - that's a suggestion that I suggest many centuries of ancient Epicureans would - and did - find offensive. One does not lightly celebrate the figures in whose name the ancient world and its ancient learning were forever (?) overthrown.

We'll be talking about issues raised in articles like this as long as we're reading about Epicurus in this group and other places. Just be aware: this "Tranquillist" viewpoint may appear to be, and may in fact be, the "Academic Orthodoxy." You may have to recite it back if you study philosophy in College.

But you don't aren't (yet) forced to believe the Tranquillist viewpoint. There are places on the internet such as this group and Epicureanfriends.com where that position does not dominate. As for me and the people whose opinions I most respect about Epicurus, if the "Tranquillist" viewpoint were in fact what Epicurus really taught, I would suggest you forget him immediately and go back to looking for a competent and truly life-affirming philosophy.