

Do Pigs Value Katastematic Pleasure? (Summer 2022 K / K Discussion)

Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2022 at 8:48 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

On perceived errors in Wikipedia: We can all be Wikipedia editors and contribute content, External links, and references to all relevant articles. Nothing stopping us but time and inertia (two powerful forces btw)

I realize that I refer to the Wikipedia situation regularly, but that's really a proxy for "the great majority of the academic and non-academic world that has written about Epicurus in the 20th/21st century," with few exceptions, notably including DeWitt, which DeWitt himself complained about in his intro to his book.

I am in pretty much agreement with everything Don wrote, as I expected I would be. The elephant in the room remains the "perspective" issue in which the commentators on Epicurus have elevated "ataraxia" (not so much aponia) as the goal of life, and they have either explicitly or implicitly equated that with a state of contemplative satisfaction which could equally be attained in essentially a very similar way by an oyster or by a healthy adult in his or her prime - i.e.: by reducing desires to an absolute minimum to sustain life, and to cultivate pleasures only as they are absolutely natural and necessary and require zero or an absolute minimum of pain to achieve.

It seems to me that Cicero's major criticism of Epicurean philosophy as not acceptable for the camp or the senate involved the presumption that Epicureans would pursue sensual pleasure and shun the required activities that are necessary to maintain a healthy and safe community.

Cicero brought out the apparent problems with holding "absence of pain" to be the highest goal, but presumably because he did not see many Epicureans of his time withdrawing from society to live in caves on bread and water, he didn't consider the logical conclusion of "absence of pain" to be worth spending much time combatting.

Once the Epicureans faded (or were driven) completely from the world stage, it hasn't been so necessary in recent centuries for the Academic majority to contend with people using Epicurean philosophy to justify actions about which the (the Academic majority) disapproved. In the modern world very few people take Epicurus seriously on his full "worldview" and the only point of interest for the majority is making sure that Epicurean views are held down into the mainstream of "humanist" philosophers, all of whom agree that there is a single "good" to which we need to aspire. And that has proven very easy to do by elevating "ataraxia" rather

than "pleasure" to the central focus of Epicurean discussion. If you demote pleasure to an inconvenient sideline, and hold up an untranslated word of uncertain meaning as a proxy for the same kind of detachment and apathy which Stoicism and other philosophies praise, then Epicurus remains a footnote to history forever.

The art of taking things out of context and elevating them to a role that they were never intended to assume is really at the heart of a lot of tactical "lawyerly" argument, so it isn't a surprise that Cicero would use the tactic to skewer Epicurus in the same way he was skewering corrupt Senators who plundered their assigned provinces or who aspired to take over the Roman republic.

And it's not surprising that the Academic world is comfortable making Epicurean "absence of pain" into a twin sister of Stoic apathy and detachment.

These issues aren't going to be solved by editing Wikipedia entries, even though that effort would be worthwhile. I personally doubt its success in doing anything more than getting a footnote that the controversy exists, since the "modern consensus" is probably 90% plus of the people who write about Epicurus. And I am not sure the number is not more like 99%.

And of course there are lots of quotes from Epicurus that we shouldn't measure our success by whether "the crowd" agrees with us or not. The best we can do is be sure we study the points and articulate them clearly when we have the chance, like we're doing in this thread, and then follow the implications of our research to put them into presentation form so we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time these issues come up.