

Personal Finance from an Epicurean Viewpoint

Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2019 at 5:34 PM

(1) Thanks Godfrey! This is a subject that I'd like to correlate with the surviving material from Philodemus in his "Property Management" material.

(2) "Epicureanism nudges people toward the idea that the greatest happiness is found in pleasures that have a minimal cost associated with them." This is an excellent pithy sentence that I think distills the problem, and I think is not correct to all. First of all, is "happiness" something that has levels? Is one "happiness" greater than another "happiness," or is all "happiness" equal. Comparisons are usually reserved for "pleasures" in that some are more or less intense, or more or less long-lasting. I don't think Epicurus ever talks in terms of "the greatest happiness."

(3) But to go further, when Epicurus talks of greater or lesser pleasures, he rarely if ever gives a description of the feeling itself- he says that we know pleasure and pain by feeling, not by explaining or justifying. And in that sense (which I think DeWitt discusses under the topic of "fullness of pleasure" -- pleasure is pretty much pleasure, differing mainly in intensity or length. And Epicurus rarely if ever gives a list of "pleasures" and says that A is better than B is better than C. Epicurus measures the hedonic calculus in pleasure vs pain, and all types of mental and physical pains are included within them. So the entire picture comes down to the issue of not that some pleasures are better than others, but simply that some pleasures bring with them more or less cost in terms of pain.

(4) If we were rewriting that sentence more accurately according to Epicurus, it would be something like "Epicurus nudges people toward the idea that the best way to fill our experience with pleasure is to choose pleasurable activities in light of the amount of pain that they bring with them." And in some cases it makes sense to sit on your sofa and drink water and eat bread, and in some cases it makes sense to build a house, make a generator, build a computer, and sign onto the internet to discuss philosophy with friends. There's nothing "simplest" or "minimal cost" to the latter choice, but if your anxieties come from fear of death or fear of gods or from a myriad of other problems, then your best result will come from the exertion involved in joining modern civilization, rather than live in a cave on bread and water.

And so there I've made my standard reservation. Having said that I certainly agree with, and try to practice many, of the observations he has made. And surely there are people who need those observations. But still.... why do I have this sense that so much is lost when we reduce Epicurus to "simplicity" 😊

Is this the Epicurean theme song? Appealing, but I don't think so --

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLAnuG1340g>