

Is pleasure as the natural goal of life falsifiable?

Post by "Don" of February 9, 2023 at 12:03 AM

As long as we're soapboxing...

I feel I should stand up for ataraxia in the face of Cassius's withering attack...

Although it may end up that we're not as far apart as it may at first seem since that seems to end up being the case on many occasions in the past. Even so...

Starting at the beginning, let me address a couple of [A Gardner](#)'s points and then [Cassius](#)'s posts.

Quote from A_Gardner

an argument against propping up pleasure as the only good in life, is that it can lead to more states of psychological unrest

No question. And Epicurus addresses this exact thing, especially in the letter to Menoikeus, in the lines about "we don't mean endless drinking parties and town festivals..." Epicurus would agree that not all pleasure should be chosen.

Quote from A_Gardner

pleasure is never a guaranteed and we often faces forms of hardship just as much if not more than pleasure, no matter how we may try to mitigate the pain and amplify the pleasure

This is where I start my advocacy for ataraxia or tranquility or calm or whatever pleasurable, stable state of mental equilibrium you want to use to translate the Greek. Epicurus is well aware we'll meet hardship. That's exactly why he advocates strengthening a quiet, calm, anxiety-free mind. That's the only pleasure we can be sure of under all circumstances - including being on the rack (although I have to agree with Emily Austin that he might be overselling here just a tad). Nonetheless, equanimity/tranquility/ataraxia is available at all times, even under duress and trying circumstances. But more on that below.

Quote from A_Gardner

Can it be argued here that ataraxia is more difficult to obtain/ maintain when faced under the duress of pain?

Of course, it's difficult. Epicurus writes to "Meditate day and night then on this and similar things by yourself as well as together with those like yourself." It's not a one and done. It takes work! That doesn't mean it's impossible.

Quote from Cassius

Of COURSE pleasure is not guaranteed, and OF COURSE we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about, which is the case of many or most of them. Should we just crawl into a hole and die and say "Oh me oh my I could have been so happy today but it's raining, and the noise outside is loud, and I have a headache which I could fix with an aspirin but i don't want to take it."

I don't agree at all that "we should feel psychological unrest if we run into obstacles to pleasure that we can do something about." Yes, we can identify obstacles that we can do something about, but we need not feel "psychological unrest." I would much rather meet obstacles clear-eyed with a calm mind and assess the evidence before me that way than to feel "unrest." And the "crawl into a hole and die" is not the opposite of feeling "psychological unrest." That simply defeatism. IF we can cultivate ataraxia, we have a much better chance of making a good choice to remove, move around, or avoid the "obstacle to pleasure" than we would if we get anxious, feel "psychological unrest" or get agitated or fearful. But let's move on...

Quote from Cassius

Same answer as to absence of disturbance. If you wake up to find that you have fallen asleep on railroad tracks, or that there's a tornado bearing down on your house, you better hope that you disturbed! You better hope you are not "tranquil" or so "calm" that you can't muster every bit of excitement and energy and determination and even anxiety that you can muster, and get to safety as quickly as you can!

If I wake up "asleep on railroad tracks" or with "a tornado bearing down on (my) house" I may feel a sense of urgency but I hope I'm not "disturbed." To me, that sounds like being overwhelmed and distressed and having a mind overcome by indecision and fear. I hope I wouldn't be like that. I would hope I have cultivated enough capacity for ataraxia that I can assess the situation clear-headed, make good decisions for the safety of myself and my family, and help calm others and get everyone to a safe place to ride out the storm.

You seem to be equating ataraxia/tranquility/calm/etc. with passiveness and being a doormat or being somehow lazy or complacent. I don't get that at all. I see ataraxia as the calm center of the hurricane. Things may be swirling around you, but your mind is calm, collected, able to assess evidence clearly.

You seem to also be equating ataraxia with [apatheia](#) which is a Stoic virtue. That's the opposite of feeling emotions (per LSJ - see link). I don't get that all either.

This is one of the reasons I enjoyed Emily Austin's book so much. Her constant refrain of the freedom from anxiety allowing us to better enjoy the necessary and extravagant pleasures struck a chord with me. That is exactly my thoughts on ataraxia in Epicurus' philosophy.

Quote from Cassius

That's the problem with defining tranquility and ataraxia as the goal of life. They AREN'T. Epicurus said it correctly over and over, the goal is PLEASURE, and in the service of pleasure, which any normal human being knows requires work to obtain, you sometime accept and even choose and welcome pain, if it helps you achieve greater pleasure.

Tranquility / ataraxia are not the "goal of life" but Epicurus stresses over and over the importance of freedom from disturbance in the mind and "pain in the body" (I have a problem with this kind of translation of aponia, but we'll leave that for another time.) There's no getting around that in the texts. And, yes, PLEASURE is the goal, and tranquility is pleasure, freedom from anxiety is pleasure, but it is pleasure that is always available to us which is why Epicurus places such importance on it - NOT exclusionary importance as the ONLY pleasure we should pursue but of significant and paramount importance to give us the possibility of the best pleasurable life possible in addition to all the other pleasures we can experience. To my reading, your Torquatus excerpt proves my point:

Quote from Torquatus from "On Ends" (Rackham)

XII. 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.

That "strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain" is exactly my understanding of what ataraxia *is* - and Torquatus places it "in the first place."

Quote

A life spent sleeping in a cave would certainly be tranquil, but it does not take an Epicurus to see that such a life would admit of a heckofa lot of improvement.

Again, "a life spent sleeping in a cave" is a straw man. My metaphor of what is meant by ataraxia / tranquility / calm is the picture of a musk ox, facing into the howling winter wind, legs braces, ice forming on its hair and face, knowing the disturbance will eventually pass ("Pain is short...") and it can then go on and paw the snow for luscious plants to eat. (Note: just a metaphor btw. Not saying musk oxen are Epicureans.)

I continue to "soapbox" that my reading of katastematic pleasures, including ataraxia, are those that arise from within ourselves and that these are the only pleasures in life that we can be confident of at all times. Epicurus includes ataraxia and aponia within the katastematic pleasures. Metrodorus stresses that these are the only ones we can be confident of:

Quote from Metrodorus

"Metrodorus, in his book *On the Source of Happiness in Ourselves being greater than that which arises from Objects*, says: 'What else is the good of the soul but the sound state of the flesh, and the sure hope of its continuance?'"

Metrodorus in his *Timocrates*, whose actual words are : "Thus pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of rest."

Metrodorus's quote is: νοουμένης δὲ ἡδονῆς τῆς τε κατὰ κίνησιν καὶ τῆς καταστηματικῆς. Right there, again, is κίνησιν (kinēsin) and καταστηματικῆς (katastēmatikēs). The kinetic pleasures arise from our interaction with external stimuli and phenomena. And Metrodorus stresses the importance of both kinds of pleasures, but he also wrote a book entitled "On the Source of Happiness in Ourselves being greater than that which arises from Objects." As Emily Austin writes in her book, if we're stuck in a hospital bed unable to move, the ONLY pleasures we can enjoy are those that arise from within our minds. I would include those pleasant memories within katastematic pleasures along with ataraxia. And we can't enjoy pleasant memories if our minds are disturbed with anxiety, depression, fear, or other painful mental conditions. Ataraxia *is* that calm mind that we have under our control and that is not at the whims of fears and anxiety, running wild in our heads.