

Would You Rather Live For A Week As (1) Epicurus During the Last Week of His Life or (2) An Anonymous Shepherd Laying In The Grass In The Summertime With No Pain At All?

Post by "Don" of September 11, 2023 at 11:05 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Well I was about to say a separate thread, but as I think about it (and as the Facebook comment implies) the question is probably tightly tied to ones idea of how to spend ones time in the best way, so let's say here.

Sounds good.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Don: unless ataraxia is limited to "mental" disturbance I cannot see how Epicurus experienced ataraxia during his last week, given his pain , and I am not sure I would say he did experience ataraxia at that time even if the definition of ataraxia were limited to mental issues, just as I think aponia is not limited to bodily pains.

...

I would see human ataraxia as denoting real experience delimited in time and not a lifetime sum.

We first have to come to an understanding of what we both mean by "ataraxia." And I'm not saying we both have the *same* understanding, or that either of us has the correct understanding. Here's my understanding.

I completely agree with your mention of "not a lifetime sum." I apologize if I implied that in my saying "Epicurus spent his life cultivating his peace of mind, banishing the fears of death and the gods." What I meant to convey was that you don't just experience ataraxia *ex nihilo*. Ataraxia grows out of ones practice and study to eradicate the fears and anxiety of death, the gods, and so on.

Ataraxia is the pleasure of experiencing a mind free from anxiety, fear, etc. It is a mind (psykhe) without ταραχή (tarakhe) "trouble, disorder, confusion." So, ἀταραξία (ataraksia) conveys a mind "without trouble, without disorder, without confusion." Consider another instance of ἀταραξία in Fragment 519: "The greatest fruit of justice is serenity." (δικαιοσύνης

καρπὸς μέγιστος ἀταραξία.) If we act justly, we don't have to have anxiety, fear, and worry about our fellow humans. This is echoed in [PD17](#): "One who acts aright is *utterly steady and serene* (ἀταρακτότατος ataraktotatos), whereas one who goes astray is full of *trouble and confusion* (ταραχῆς tarakhēs)."

Ataraxia is experienced as a mind untroubled by fear of the gods, anxiety about death, trust in that you are treating people justly and can expect the same in return. Once those fears and anxieties are rooted out, they don't return. One characteristic of an Epicurean sage (which we can assume Epicurus himself would have been as close as possible to as anyone) is "once the sage has become wise, they will no longer fall back into the opposite (of wisdom)."

For me, ataraxia is not some "special" state one achieves in special circumstances, not some kind of meditative tranquility, not some kind of transitory fleeting feeling. Ataraxia is the prolonged/persistent feeling of a mind untroubled by fear, anxiety, and so (as outlined above). It is the solid foundation of a state of mind through which one can experience the world free from those fears, anxieties, and so on. *On Piety* by Philodemus provides the line (1532-3) "...we (Epicureans) all regard our doctrines/teachings (dogmata) as the true cause of our own tranquility (ataraxia)."

Which brings me back to your original question: "Was Epicurus experiencing ataraxia during that last week of his life?" Given *my* understanding of ataraxia as outlined here, my answer would be "yes... to the extent that he was in possession of his mental faculties between bouts of severe pain." But even when in pain, I would say he still experienced the world with his mind grounded in ataraxia. He would have had no anxiety about the gods. He would have had no fear of death. He knew he treated people fairly and that he was surrounded by friends. He had made as many preparations for the future of his school as was possible and took pleasure in imagining his friends and students continuing on after he ceased to exist. That to me is the textbook experience of ataraxia, so, yes, Epicurus was experiencing ataraxia during the last week of his life to the extent that his failing body would allow him to be cognizant of it.