

Episode 239 - Cicero's OTNOTG 14 - The Dishonesty Of Academic Skepticism vs. Epicurus' Commitment To Truth

Post by "Cassius" of July 30, 2024 at 9:56 AM

A glance at Wikipedia doesn't help much to get a fix on Juvenal, but I do have a couple of additional thoughts. We spent most of our time in this episode criticizing Academic Skepticism and its self-contradictions and lack of position-taking, and some of that applies to that excerpt. It's probably helpful exercise to be able to take any passage and be able to pull it apart and ask Epicurean questions about it to see if it's really helpful or not.

Just what is Juvenal advocating, when his words can be interpreted acceptably by Stoic or Epicurean? Would a Christian or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist have any objection to this wording? If **everyone** finds it acceptable despite their dramatically different worldviews, that strikes me as a major red flag.

As to the first two lines, a healthy body isn't so hard to quantify, but what exactly is a healthy mind? Isn't that the ultimate question? And why not be afraid of death? For the Epicurean reason that there is no existence after death, or for an anti-Epicurean reason that a god is going to reward you in an afterlife?

After the first two lines, each of the following lines seems to me to have a decided unEpicurean slant:

and deems length of days the least of Nature's gifts
that can endure any kind of toil,
that knows neither wrath nor desire and thinks
the woes and hard labors of Hercules better than
the loves and banquets and downy cushions of Sardanapalus.
What I commend to you, you can give to yourself;
For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.

1. Time ("*length of days*") is the **least** of Nature's gifts? Doesn't that reduce to not needing life at all, and doesn't Epicurus specifically condemn the view that it would be better never to have been born, and doesn't Epicurus say that life is desirable?
2. *Enduring any kind of toil*? Doesn't it make a lot of difference **why** you are toiling?
3. *Knows neither wrath nor desire*? Aren't there times to be angry, as Philodemus preserves for us, and don't we find life to be desirable, as Epicurus says to Menoecus?
4. *Woes and hard labors of Hercules*? Doesn't Lucretius directly minimize Hercules as a symbol by pointing out that his labors were largely unnecessary? I don't get the impression that the Epicureans would have considered Hercules to be a negative figure in

- all cases, but when Hercules is set up as a paradigm of choosing virtue, not as a means to pleasure, but as an end in itself, then that crosses a line to the clearly negative.
5. Criticisms of the "*loves and banquets and cushions*" of *Sardanapalus* makes sense in Epicurean terms, **if** the reader understands Sardanapalus as in fact not being successful in living a happy life (in which case it would be consistent with [PD10](#)), but Wikipedia says: "The name Sardanapalus is probably a corruption of [Ashurbanipal](#) (*Aššur-bāni-apli* > *Sardan-ápalos*), an Assyrian emperor, but Sardanapalus as described by Diodorus bears little relationship with what is known of that king, who in fact was a militarily powerful, highly efficient and scholarly ruler, presiding over the largest empire the world had yet seen. ... There is no evidence from Mesopotamia that either Ashurbanipal or Shamash-shum-ukin led hedonistic lifestyles, were homosexual or transvestites. Both appear to have been strong, disciplined, serious and ambitious rulers, and Ashurbanipal was known to be a literate and scholarly king with an interest in [mathematics](#), [astronomy](#), [astrology](#), [history](#), [zoology](#) and [botany](#).^[6]" The way the line is written, Juvenal takes the story as a caricature that makes it sound like he is condemning *all* luxury *all* the time, which is not what Epicurus says to Menoeceus.
 6. "*What I commend to you, you can give to yourself*" can certainly be read acceptably, but more than anything else it has a Stoic "mind over matter" ring to it, as if you are *oblivious to outside circumstances*, which Epicureans (who cry out when under torture) are *not*.
 7. "*For assuredly, the only road to a life of peace is virtue.*" And of course the road set out by Epicurus is to "pleasure," and not to "peace," even if the road can be considered to be one of virtue, per [PD05](#). Everything about the tone of this excerpt implies that "virtue" is being stated in the Stoic sense, not the Epicurean sense.