

Epicurean versus deceptive (“modern”) Stoic decision making

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2024 at 3:21 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

"What is desire?" reminds me of how important it is to stick closely to ordinary language, to not redefine things but to remain as close to everyday speech as possible.

To this we are going to have to compare a series of text references that show that while Epicurus felt it important to be clear, he did not think it was important, and in fact was willing to radically redefine, that to which ordinary words are used to refer.

I think it is clear from the texts for example that he used "gods," and "pleasure," and even "virtue" in ways radically different than common usage, and so he was not willing to accept terminology that is used in everyday speech.

For example he said:

Letter to Herodotus: "First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning. [38] For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference. And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen."

--- I do not believe this means that we use words in a way that conforms to ordinary usage in all cases, but overridingly that we are clear, by stating our terms, even when others disagree with us:

[VS29](#). For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many. Note 29 Translation by C. Yapijakis, Epicurean Garden of Athens, Greece. Bailey: "In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and like an oracle to give answers serviceable to all mankind, even though no one should understand me, rather than to conform to popular opinions and so win the praise freely

scattered by the mob.”

And we know from repeated complaints from Cicero that Epicurus used words (such as pleasure and prolepsis) in new ways that no one had done before, which was such a great source of controversy that Cicero's complaints are unmistakable that he was in fact actually doing that.\

So with "desire" as much as "pleasure," it will be necessary for us to take a position on exactly what Epicurus was referring to. This would be at the root of the controversy we continually have over whether Epicurus was attempting to "eradicate all desire" as Buddhists or Stoics would argue, or whether it was only particularly harmful desires (those that cannot possibly be attained or clearly can be expected to bring more pain than pleasure) to which he was advising caution.