

"Self Help Is Like a Vaccine" by Bryan Caplan

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2024 at 10:54 AM

This thread returns to my mind as I am completing editing of Episode 249.

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

the pursuit of inner peace, the importance of friendship, the value of rational thinking, and the focus on achievable, natural pleasures rather than vain desires. It provides a strong historical and philosophical foundation for our approach to stress management and the pursuit of happiness.

That quote is a pretty good summary of what people generally read about Epicurus. And it is very true, I think, as far as it goes. The ambiguity that I find of most concern when I talk to people (especially when the conversation includes emphasis on such things as "stress management") is often expressed something like:

"What does 'the pursuit of happiness' really mean in concrete terms for what I should do with my time today? Stop talking in platitudes, Epicurus! (... or Aristotle, or anyone else who talks about happiness or eudaemonia. Give me something concrete. Tell me how I myself should spend my own time to achieve "the greatest happiness" or "the greatest pleasure."

The reason this returns to mind in episode 249 is that one statement of Cotta is:

Quote

XXXVII. ... Epicurus truly, like indolent boys, thinks nothing preferable to idleness; yet those very boys, when they have a holiday, entertain themselves in some sportive exercise. But we are to suppose the Deity in such an inactive state that if he should move we may justly fear he would be no longer happy. This doctrine divests the Gods of motion and operation; besides, it encourages men to be lazy, as they are by this taught to believe that the least labor is incompatible even with divine felicity.

This is essentially the charge that is also leveled against Epicurean ethics in general -- that "pleasure" (or any form of "happiness" linked to pleasure) is for the lazy and slothful, fit not as a goal for man, and certainly not fit as a goal for a god, and thus the entire Epicurean position is fit only for the lazy and worthless.

Talking about stress management and balance is all well and good for those who are primarily motivated by escape from pain. But the task at hand that Cicero doesn't allow Velleius to present, and Cicero allows Torquatus only to present briefly, is what kind of action is involved in this best life of pleasure and happiness.

Are we talking the pleasure of indolence, or the pleasures of pleasurable actions, and how do we explain the difference.

Cicero doesn't allow Torquatus or Velleius to say much like this following statement by Thomas Jefferson to William Short, but I think it's an example of how to point in the right direction.

[Quote from Thomas Jefferson Letter to William Short](#)

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up.....

(I added this post also to the thread for [Episode 219](#).)