

Question on Lucretius

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 5:32 PM

I wrote my last post in a hurry and probably i should go further. Earlier today I had been reading David Hume's "Dialogues on Natural religion, and one of the characters in that Dialogue was a strong mystic who was focused on suffering in life as the main reason for being concerned about "gods." I observe over time that there is a significant tendency in some circles to focus on "escaping pain" rather than "obtaining pleasure," and even though in Epicurean terms those end up being the same thing, anyone who does not think strictly in Epicurean terms (and that is 99.9% of people today) will not realize that since there are only two categories of feelings, "absence of pain" measures out to have precisely the same meaning as "pleasure." Rather than knowing Epicurus' equivalency of terms, they tend to think that he is prioritizing organizing one's life to 'minimize pain" rather than to "maximize pleasure." Again those turn out to be the same thing in Epicurean terms, but ask any Buddhist or Stoic or someone else who is focused on the idea that "life is suffering" or that "suffering is good" and they are likely to think that you mean something else.

Epicurus clearly focuses on the view that life is short, and only life gives an opportunity for pleasure, and that nature's calling is to maximize pleasure. Nature gives us huge numbers of ways to do that, and given Epicurus' expansive way of viewing pleasure, the wise man will always have more reason for joy than for vexation.

So that distinction between "running from pain" vs "pursuing pleasure, even when some pain is required" is what I wanted to emphasize.

If Epicurus had thought that you could submit to a supernatural god and thereby obtain an eternal life of pleasure, he would certainly have done so. He wanted to know the truth, and he concluded that pleasure in life is the best we can hope for, so he developed a theory that allowed him to do that. But the starting point was wanting to know the truth, and only then did he decide that pleasure and pain are the way to measure the best life. He didn't start with a preferred conclusion and a willingness to bend the truth to what he wanted.