

Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2025 at 4:31 PM

Something else:

In discussing DeWitt's analysis of extending the meaning of pleasure to all that is not painful, I think DeWitt drives the ball right up to the goal line, but I am not sure he scores the touchdown.

Likewise, I think that Cicero allows Torquatus to explain the point of absence of pain in a relatively complete way, and we'd be much worse off if we didn't have this, but he still doesn't let Torquatus drive the point home with force. He never lets Torquatus give a fully adequate closing argument on why men who say they are without pain are at the height of pleasure, or why the host pouring wine is at an equal state of pleasure as the guest drinking it.

My view of the situation is that in order to drive the point home forcefully, you have to vigorously argue the "why" of the Epicurean perspective, and that goes back to the main fight - with supernatural religion.

DeWitt could explain Epicurus' position and say that men would be better off if they thought this way, but in his time and place as a college professor he could launch the kind of frontal attack against religion that Frances Wright did in the final chapter of "A Few Days In Athens."

And Cicero wasn't going to do Epicureans the favor of preserving their full arguments in his own work. You have to piece it together from "On the Nature of the Gods" and "On Ends" and others.

Some people who come to the realization that Epicurus was simply extending the name of pleasure to all life that is not painful are going to think that Epicurus was "cheating" or "playing word games" and they are going to walk away disappointed.

I think that's why so many people also find Lucretius disappointing - they want more ethics and less atoms.

But I think the truth is that Lucretius' presentation IS Epicurean philosophy at its core, because when you try to talk someone who is not an Epicurean into being an Epicurean, you don't start off with pleasure and pain. You start off with explaining that the universe is not supernatural, and that there are no absolute truths, and THEN you go on to show that pleasure and pain are all that nature gives us to decide how to live.

The point I am trying to make is that Epicurus did what he did for a very good reason - because the world then and now is populated by charlatan priests and philosophers who are trying to use their supposed privileged knowledge to manipulate other people. And the proper response to that is to go right back at them, as did the Epicurean in Lucian's essay who stood up to Alexander the Oracle Monger, And equally or more bad are the Academic Skeptics who say that

no knowledge is possible in the first place and we have to just drift through life never being confident of anything except that the person who stands up for himself is a danger to skepticism.

So in the end I see "natural and necessary desire analysis" as a good suggestion for living pleasurably, but surely most people of any background religious or otherwise can understand that point, so, as I see it, it's not uniquely Epicurean or central to the philosophy.

But you are right to struggle with it because you need to be comfortable that you have an explanation for where it fits in.

Otherwise, just like "pleasure is the absence of pain," you'll end up with an absolutely harmful construction of Epicurean philosophy that I would advise you to run from as fast as you can. Because buried in the "always be satisfied with only what you need to stay alive, and never try for anything more" viewpoint is Buddhism and Stoicism and JudeoChristianity and worse.