

Preuss - "Epicurean Ethics - Katastematic Hedonism"

Post by "Cassius" of July 12, 2025 at 8:32 PM

Let me start off this thread by making clear that the inclusion of this book here is not an endorsement by me. It's clear that the book contains a lot of good reference material, but at the time I am posting this I am going to start off by citing several sections that indicate that the author disagrees strongly in his interpretations of katastematic pleasure with both David Sedley and AA Long (Hellenistic Philosophers) and Gosling and Taylor (The Greeks on Pleasure). Given her footnote as to her agreement with Gosling and Taylor, we can probably also consider Emily Austin as another in disagreement with Pruess.

However this is an important topic and it's always good to go through something as basic and important as the question of whether the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure, and the elevation of katastematic pleasure as the true goal of Epicurean philosophy, is an accurate conclusion or a gross misreading or somewhere in between.

Here are some clips to get us started:

First, it appears that regardless of his views on pleasure, Preuss holds a very unconventional view on Epicurus' view of death. Preuss apparently believes that Epicurus held open the possibility of life after death, citing another article Preuss himself has written on reincarnation as containing potential evidence of which Epicurus was unaware.

We indicated in our third chapter that Epicurus did not consider the prospect of our final extinction to be a certainty because the arguments, though powerful, did not establish their conclusion with certainty, if only because no future tensed proposition can be true or false, but will always only be probable. Given the evidence he had, Epicurus was quite right that a person with a well developed intellectual conscience is not available to the siren call of mere promises; but for Epicurus, the philosophical theoretician, the issue is never finally closed. Were new evidence to come to light, his philosophical conscience would as surely enjoin him to listen as it would prevent his being impressed by a mere promise. Our question now is: if sufficient evidence were to come to light to make post-mortem existence more probable than extinction,⁴⁵⁷ if Epicurus were wrong

⁴⁵⁷In fact there is some impressive evidence of which Epicurus was unaware. See, for example, my Reincarnation, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.

The distinction is of central importance to understanding Epicurean ethics. Diogenes Laertius lists several books of Epicurus²⁰⁴ in which he works on this distinction. As we shall see, katastematic pleasure is the most important concept in Epicurean ethics and, though it is not wrong to think that Epicurus took

²⁰²D.L. 10.136.

²⁰³Aristotle characterizes pleasure as "the activity of the natural state" (E.N. 1153a14) and observes that "there is not only an activity of movement but an activity of immobility, and pleasure is found more in rest than in movement." (E.N. 1154b28).

²⁰⁴D.L.10.136: On Choice and Avoidance, On the End, On Lives book 1, the letter to the philosophers in Mytilene.

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Preuss is critical of Sedley and Long's interpretations of the same issue:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4614-preuss-epicurean-ethics-katastematic-hedonism/?postID=36323#post36323>

Two Recent Interpretations

Anthony Long and David Sedley have collaborated to produce a wonderful study of Hellenistic philosophy.²⁰⁵ Their treatment of Epicurus' distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure, however, and in particular of the ethically central concept of katastematic pleasure is disappointing. Kinetic

Gosling and Taylor

Cicero should be read with caution, for when read with caution he is without doubt a valuable source of Epicurean thought. It is, of course, difficult to say just how far a commentator can be trusted once you have good reason to have reservations about his reports. But such reservations can be taken too far and it seems to me that the work of Gosling and Taylor is a case in point. In a major

²¹⁸cf. D.L. 10.118.

²¹⁹cf. D.L. 10.22.

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recent interpretation²²⁰ of the Epicurean theory of pleasure they essentially ascribe the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasure to Cicero, then undermine Cicero's credibility as a reliable source of authentic Epicureanism, with the effect that the distinction itself is almost eliminated.

It should be clear that Gosling and Taylor's interpretation is a dramatic departure from the norm of Epicurean scholarship in that it rejects what had previously been a fundamental point of agreement among diverse interpretations. They are, of course, aware of that and their argument reflects this in its thoroughness and detail. But their argument is unconvincing and it is important for us to see how it fails before offering our own reading of Epicurus' theory.

I haven't yet gotten into Preuss' own arguments but we can do that as time permits. Suffice it to say that he concludes as indicated above that "katatematic pleasure" is what Epicurus is all about.

And for the time being I'll just repeat personally that I am solidly with Sedley & Long, Gosling & Taylor, Emily Austin, and Boris [Nikolsky](#) (which summarizes much of this debate in his "Epicurus on Pleasure" article here in our files section).