

Preuss - "Epicurean Ethics - Katastematic Hedonism"

Post by "Cassius" of July 13, 2025 at 6:40 AM

Sounds like you are correct and given your explanation we are not so far apart as might first appear.

However there may be one issue where we simply have a different diagnosis of the prevailing situation:

[Quote from DistantLaughter](#)

the pleasant turns out to be that which contributes to a tranquil and painless state of body and mind—a katastematic condition, even if he doesn't use that term himself. So, when some people talk about "peace of mind" as the goal, they're typically using it as shorthand for that condition of ongoing, stable pleasure free from turmoil—rather than as a mystical or detached asceticism.

I note that in the underlined section you use the word "some" and so with that caveat I can certainly agree with you on even this statement.

However I would diagnose that the number of people at least in today's world, and I would probably carry this back even to Cicero's time, and certainly to the time when Stoicism and then Judeo-Christianity took over the West, are not seeing "tranquility" or even "peace of mind" in that way.

Rather, my view is that there is strong tendency to see tranquility as detachment and indifference and apathy and eventually even to asceticism and nihilism.

By coincidence we are going through section 3 of Tusculan Disputations right now, and my observation is that the greater and now prevailing danger in the word is that people see it as Cicero describes the Stoics as seeing it as here in subsection X:

Quote

Therefore compassion and envy are consistent in the same man; for whoever is uneasy at any one's adversity, is also uneasy at another's prosperity: as Theophrastus while he laments the death of his companion Callisthenes, is at the same time disturbed at the success of Alexander; and therefore he says, that Callisthenes met with a man of the greatest power and good fortune, but one who did not know how to make use of his good fortune. And as pity is an uneasiness which arises from the misfortunes of

another, so envy is an uneasiness that proceeds from the good success of another: therefore whoever is capable of pity, is capable of envy. But a wise man is incapable of envy, and consequently incapable of pity. But were a wise man used to grieve, to pity also would be familiar to him; therefore to grieve, is a feeling which cannot affect a wise man. Now, though these reasonings of the Stoics, and their conclusions, are rather strained and distorted, and ought to be expressed in a less stringent and narrow manner, yet great stress is to be laid on the opinions of those men who have a peculiarly bold and manly turn of thought and sentiment.

When one stresses tranquility or peace of mind as the goal, rather than a more normal understanding of pleasure as a wide variety of both physical and mental pleasures involving not only "rest" but also "activity," the logical result of such a stress for those who do not have an extensive background in reading Epicurus (or even for those who do) is going to conclude that nothing in life is worth being "disturbed" or losing one's "peace of mind." Even Cicero acknowledges that this is perverse reasoning, and yet he endorses it anyway as worthy of admiration.

That's the kind of conclusion I even see in Preuss' final chapter, as if it is a good argument that we can take comfort that the world would not fall apart if everyone were Epicurean because people would not actually be so extreme as to take katastematic pleasure to its logical conclusion.

To me that is an absolute loser of an argument and an analysis, and there is no way that Epicurus would have "taken the Roman world by storm" if he had been understood to be saying so.

But today, when there is much more evidence in people adopting views such as Buddhism or nihilism or modern Stoicism that people are in fact taking the desire for "calm" to such an extreme, it seems to me it is even more important than ever not to add more fuel to that fire through argument that the evidence indicates that Epicurus himself did not stress.

It's definitely become my view in recent years that the study of Epicureanism demands an initial grounding in explaining how Epicurus used critically important words in non-standard ways, and I would definitely add Tranquility / calmness / ataraxia to that list that needs explanation. But I also think that the opening explanation starts not at calmness and tranquility, which everyone including me sees as a desirable quality at least most of the time, but at "Pleasure," which is where Preuss is giving an example of how the problem is that Epicurus is alleged to have subtracted much of the normal and ordinary meaning of the word, rather than having added the additional observation that life itself is so valuable that every aspect of it needs to be treasured so long as that aspect is not explicitly painful.

As in reference the Chrysippus' challenge in On Ends Book One as to the hand in its normal state being in a state of pleasure, and even in highest pleasure, it is necessary to understand

that immobility and detachment from all action is not the "normal state" of a hand, and it would be perverse to interpret the logical sparring between Stoics and Epicureans in that way. The normal state of a hand or any other part of the body implies it is in good working condition, and setting out "calmness" as description of that working condition is an invitation to disastrous conclusions.

And to close this post that's exactly why I believe the consensus that "tranquility" is the goal rather than "pleasure" has become so strong -- because so many people (not the ancient Epicureans themselves, but their opponents -- are more than happy to use any argument available to them to divest "pleasure" of its full meaning. I recognize that there are many people in good faith who come to this conclusion for the most good-hearted of reasons, and I wouldn't doubt that Preuss is one of them. But to clearly entitle a book as he did that the true goal of Epicurean philosophy is not "Pleasure" but "Katastematic Hedonism" is to either subconsciously or consciously extend a trend which has doomed Epicurean Philosophy to being considered as an oddly-worded subset of Stoicism for many generations.

And that's a situation that needs to be changed.