

Article By Dr. Emily Austin - "Epicurus And The Politics Of The Fear Of Death"

Post by "Cassius" of December 10, 2025 at 9:18 AM

OH NO! A great point but far too brief! I wish she had gone into this further but she stopped before elaborating.

I'd say she's definitely right in the point below, and this is one of the most important take-aways of the article that goes far beyond the issue of death. The Epicurean goal is not perfectionism of absolute elimination of all pain before you can consider yourself to be truly happy. This section too is very understated and diplomatic, but very very implicitly critical of "wikipedia Epicureanism:!"

Quote

There remains one key objection: it seems that my interpretation threatens the possibility of ataraxia. Fear, like grief, is a negative emotion, so an argument that claims we are all motivated to act in light of an ineliminable (though generally controllable) fear might appear to undercut the Epicurean quest for an anxiety-free life. If my thesis requires that Epicurus jettison a fundamental psychological principle that guides his eudaemonist ethics, interpretive consistency is very much against me. One live option is to retreat to the idea that Epicureanism is a perfectionist ethics, according to which even the best of us can only approximate ataraxia, if only because there are some psychological and bodily limitations imposed on natural creatures. Perfectionism is not a terribly uncommon feature of ancient ethical theories, and those who are perfect are often judged divine rather than human.²⁹ Another alternative is to reconceive ataraxia in light of evidence that even sages experience characteristically negative emotions. Some texts, for instance, indicate that the sage grieves the deaths of her friends and shares their suffering. On this front, Epicureans seek to differentiate themselves from the Stoics, whose resistance to grief seemed positively inhumane (VS 66, DL X, 120; Plutarch, *A Pleasant Life*, 1101ab: Us. 120). If the sage achieves and maintains ataraxia, yet grieves at the same time, then ataraxia might withstand some other natural, negative human emotions.

A more general takeaway here is how this article serves as a warning to the deep issues between Epicurean commentators. A lot of this article is a very diplomatic attack on the positions of people like James Warren. I haven't devoted a lot of time over the years to

criticizing Warren directly, but it seems to me that his positions are often indicative of a sort of "British Epicureanism" that has a large of element of Stoicism baked in.

That's not to slam at everything he writes or on all British writers on Epicurus. I'd say that David Sedley and/or Martin Ferguson Smith are the greatest living interpreters of Epicurus. But after them, and already exceeding them in some ways, I'd say is Emily Austin. She seems to me to be free of almost all this British Stoic/Buddhist influence which has many Epicureans at the point where they don't seem able to articulate a strong position why they would have any care as to whether this day is their last.

But there are deep problems with the British Epicureanism that is often accepted as the orthodox way to interpret Epicurus. This article is a great example of pushing back against that.