

Opening Discussion of Kelly Arenson's "Health And Happiness In Plato And Epicurus"

Post by "Cassius" of July 26, 2026 at 5:24 PM

I am still in the process of reading this book but I have added it to the "recommended" section along with the DeWitt and Austin books for several reasons:

1. Generally, she takes a modified "Gosling & Taylor" approach and does not read "kinetic pleasure" out off the goal of Epicurean philosophy.
2. More specifically, these two paragraphs quoted below are a compelling argument against anyone who wants to argue that the Epicurean goal is "health" rather than pleasure. This is an excellent point and observation - I'd put it on par in terms of insight with Emily Austin's suggestion in Chapter 22 of Living For Pleasure that Lucretius likely intended to end Book Six of his poem with additional material from Thucydides. In what I am about to quote Arenson raises a point that is of even greater practical importance.

I have added the underlines to emphasize the issue.

Quote from Kelly Arenson - Health and Hedonism In Plato And Epicurus - p 161

Given that the Epicureans stress how important health and the awareness of it is to happiness, one lingering question is why they do not identify health rather than pleasure as our highest and innate good. Why factor hedonism into the equation at all? It seems they could have gone the route of Plato's Republic and claimed that although the best life is pleasant, our aim should be the internal harmony that engenders the pleasure rather than the pleasure itself. Perhaps this is just a version of Cicero's objection that the Epicureans seem to propose two distinct goals: pleasure and the absence of pain. If the Epicureans understand the absence of pain in terms of health, then why not say that the end is health rather than pleasure? Perhaps the Epicureans do not stop at health because they are interested in describing the telos in terms of human feelings: that is, even if health were ontologically or epistemologically the best condition for humans, Epicureans would not be interested unless health also felt the best. We get the sense that in Plato's eyes the just life will still be the best even if it is not the most pleasant: a just soul is always ontologically better than an unjust one. But the goal of Epicureanism is to help people feel better—to lessen their anxiety, help them avoid frustrated desires, and enable them to enjoy their lives. To say that health itself is the goal, divorced from our perceptions of how health feels, would be nonsensical to Epicureans, who would argue that health is worth talking about at all

only because of its connection to the feeling of pleasure.

I think this point is related to Epicurus' rejection of philosophy as an end in itself. For the most part, Epicurus advises us to concern ourselves with philosophy insofar as it will lead to pleasure. This position is expressed in an Epicurean work of unknown origin, reported by Porphyry: "Empty is that philosopher's reasoning by which no human affliction is cured. For just as there is no benefit in the medical art if it does not cure the diseases of bodies, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does not drive affliction out of the soul." According to Epicureans, we should learn the truth about the gods, the limits of pain, and our abilities to get what we desire because having this knowledge enables us to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. We will have no use for philosophy if it should fail to bring about painless mental and physical experiences, and we will have no use for health if it should fail to do the same. This is not to say that Epicureans envision a contingent connection between health and pleasure; they argue, as I have tried to show in this study, that our experience of health—either in the process toward achieving it or in the condition itself—is intrinsically related to pleasure. Nevertheless, Epicureans would say that were health not linked to pleasure in this way, there would be no reason to care about health's ontological credentials.

This is brilliant - and devastating to argument that the true goal isn't Pleasure, and arguments that state or imply that we don't need pleasure - "all we need is health of mind and body."