

Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19

Post by "Cassius" of December 27, 2019 at 6:41 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

that you just use my words to build a bigger wall between us, so it feel so pointless and I don't feel like you will profit from anything I say anymore,

Hiram:

Building a wall between us is not my intent at all, and it is definitely not true that I do not profit from what you say.

As I see it, you have always had more of an emphasis on "building bridges to other traditions" while my emphasis has always been more on getting a more clear understanding of what Epicurus himself said without regard to bridges to other traditions.

I have been thinking about these issues in relationship to the sometimes competing goals of "truth" vs. "happiness." I think it is tempting for some people to start with "happiness" as their goal, and to think that it is not necessary to be concerned about whether the path to happiness aligns with "truth" or not. And then we have to overlay that with one of the issues we have discussed here, which is the issue of "objective" vs. "subjective" truth.

I cannot speak for other traditions, but I identify with Greco-Western traditions, and within that there is I think a dedication to the premise that while the "truth" may not always be happy, the best way to happiness is always going to be found by starting looking for the truth. That's why I think Epicurean philosophy starts with physics and epistemology (as did Lucretius) rather than by ethical conclusions. If it were "true" that the universe had been created by a supernatural god, then we would move heaven and earth to try to find out and conform ourselves to that divine will. And that is why Epicurus was considered a "dogmatist" -- even though we perceive the universe subjectively through our senses, we analyse the situation and have confidence that some observations (absence of a supernatural god creating the universe) are so well confirmed by the evidence that we can be "dogmatic" that we are correct on such issue.

It is only because we first start out by concluding that there ARE no supernatural gods that we conclude that feeling is the only proper goal. Now if that builds a wall between an Epicurean and all religious-based non-Epicureans, then so be it, as far as I am concerned. And to the best I can tell, that was Epicurus' attitude as well. It would be nice to expand our circle of Epicurean friends as far as possible, but not at the expense of the basic truth that the best path to happiness (a life guided by pleasure) comes by rejecting all pretence to the supernatural.

So while it is very tempting for me to stretch my understanding of the texts in an attempt to agree with you when I sense that we disagree, I think it is not a good choice to disguise the disagreement.

And that is where I think it is clear that I do profit from these exchanges with you.

As I see it, you frequently occupy an untenable middle ground between Epicurean philosophy and humanism, and I think that you sense that, but have simply decided to weigh in with humanism due to your personal preferences. I certainly have personal preferences myself, and at appropriate times and places I express them, but the reason we came together in the first place and collaborate has been the promotion of Epicurean philosophy in general, not particular applications of it with which you or I might personally disagree.

I hope for the future that we can have these discussions a thousand times over, with thousands of new people, because I think the issues we are confronting are crucial. And they are likely inevitable for many years to come. Everyone is going to have to decide whether the "truth" (which is that nature does not endorse their personal sense of pleasure) is more important than first acknowledging that it is the **feeling of pleasure** (which is not experienced in the same way for everyone) that is the guide, not any personal application of a specific pleasure that is the same for everyone. It is easy to have an organization dedicated to the pleasure of fishing, and within that group there can be all types of fishing which virtually everyone in the group can appreciate. But Epicurean philosophy teaches "the feeling of pleasure" as a replacement for false ideas of supernatural gods and universal ideals, rather than "pleasure as experienced by Americans" or "pleasure as experienced by Russians" or "pleasure as experienced by Saudi Arabians." And on and on -- the point is easy to see, but not to accept within the framework of supernatural religion or of idealistic one-size-fits-all theories like "humanism."

I think I see this same tension in the work of Catherine Wilson, whose recent books in many ways hark back more to the DeWitt model than to the Okeefe "absence of pain" nonsense. Wilson seems to throw her weight behind a common sense interpretation of pleasure, and she is willing to state fairly clearly that she is an Epicurean, and not a Stoic, despite what is no doubt a lot of peer pressure to "just get along" with everyone.

And yet she laces her Epicurean writings with her own personal political preferences that contradict the core issue that we are talking about -- that EVERYONE has personal political preferences because everyone is an individual with a different experience of what is pleasing to them -- and Wilson undercuts her credibility and effectiveness by not acknowledging that.

Epicurean philosophy is not "humanism" and in many ways it is the *opposite* of humanism, which is just as "universalistic" and "absolutist" in nature as is Christianity, Judaism, or any variation of Abrahamic religion.

These are the issues that I see dividing us, but I don't take them personally and I hope that you will not either. We may well take them in different directions, which as I keep saying I think is inevitable since specific experience of pleasure is not the same for everyone. But let me be

clear that when I say that I am not inviting a "split" -- what I am hoping for over time is that we will have communities of Epicureans worldwide who will acknowledge that while they have their own respective views of the happiest way to live, that the basic insights of Epicurus about the nature of the universe, and the pursuit of happiness being justified by nature, gives them truly a shared basis for working out their differences in a much better way than supernatural religion or absolutist humanism would ever allow.