

How NOT To Escape Plato's Cave

Post by “Cassius” of February 27, 2020 at 8:37 AM

Thanks to Trey for suggesting this article, [Epicurus on the Three Obstacles to Happiness and Tranquility](#), and [this Reddit discussion](#).

The subject deserves a lot more time than I can give it right now, it gives us another opportunity to discuss the divergent viewpoints of Epicurus and the need to take a position on which is correct. That's why I entitled this post "How NOT To Escape Plato's Cave," because in my view if you follow the leads of this article you will not only never escape Plato's cave, you will assist in the chaining to the floor next to you the one philosopher who can show you the way to freedom.

The article is admirably clear about its position, and as a result we can take the opening paragraphs and highlight seven points that will jump out at you if you take the time to read the texts thoroughly for yourself, reflect on what the ancient writers who actually knew this material said about it, and put aside for the moment the modern analysis that much more deserves the label "neo-Stoic," as it hardly rises even to the level of "neo-Epicurean."

Here the opening paragraphs followed by my comments on each point.

According to **Epicurus** (341–270 B.C.E.), an ancient Greek philosopher and the founder of Epicureanism, the path to living the good life is self-evident. At bottom, there is something that we all seek for its own sake, and that is pleasure, just as we all seek to avoid the opposite of pleasure, pain. Since we all know with relative certainty the kinds of things that bring us both pleasure and pain, we can use this knowledge as the foundation for living the best possible life.

Not all pleasure, however, is created equal; Epicurus made key distinctions between the types and degrees of pleasures, and prioritized the attainment of long-term pleasure, or tranquility (ataraxia), over short-term pleasure. This is why a fairer characterization of his philosophy is to describe it as "tranquilist" rather than hedonistic.

We may engage in the hedonistic pursuit of short-term pleasure, for instance, by overindulging in the consumption of alcohol. In the longer term, however, this will decrease our overall amount of pleasure as we must face the consequences and pain of overindulgence: hangovers, alcoholism, the risk of physical disease and premature death, etc. For Epicurus, the tranquility associated with moderate satiation is to be valued more highly than the intense pursuit of short-term overindulgence. This ensures a maximization of the total amount of consistent pleasure attained over a lifetime. As Epicurus said:

(1) and (2) These points are closely related. *Epicurus did not hold that "the path to living the good life" is self-evident*, nor did he teach that "we all know with relative certainty the kinds of things that bring us both pleasure and pain." This kind of analysis exactly what you would expect from a Platonic jailer. Epicurus explicitly stated over and over that the way forward toward the best life requires the study of nature, and reflection on the meaning of what we observe. Anyone who reads book one of Lucretius, which is simply a poetic version of Epicurus' foundational masterpiece "On Nature," will be struck by the long chain of deductive analysis that starts with observing that nothing comes from nothing, and leads us step by step to concluding that the universe is boundless in size, infinite in space, filled with life on other worlds, and that our human "souls" are a material part of that same universe in which there are no supernatural gods, no rewards or punishments in this life for obeying the priests, and no life after death to compensate us for the time we waste listening to them while we live. None of that is in the least "self-evident." Nor did Epicurus teach that "we all know with relative certainty what brings us pleasure and pain." Once again Plato applies his chains because the guide of life in Epicurus is not *knowing* in the traditional Platonic / Aristotelian sense, but *feeling*. The senses are our contacts with reality, and the feelings of pleasure and pain are our guides to life through a constantly moving universe in which there are no absolute rights and wrongs,

goods and evils, but only contextual choices that will lead to pleasure or pain depending on our circumstances. Epicurus will teach you that there is no logical or mathematical or geometric shortcut to pleasurable living, but if you are deceived by the Platonists into thinking that such as formula is the only acceptable answer to the question of how to live, you will never escape the cave.

(3) (4) and (5) Epicurus did not hold that "not all pleasure is created equal." He quite explicitly held that all pleasure is desirable because it is pleasurable, just as all pain is undesirable because it is painful, and he did not provide an explicit list of "good pleasures" or "noble pleasures" or "worthy pleasures" to prioritize, which is what the article is implying. *"For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."* (Letter to Menoeceus) Epicurus was very clear that every choice has to be evaluated according to the pain and pleasure that will result from it, but he emphatically did NOT state that "long-term" pleasure should be chosen in every case over "short-term" pleasure. He specifically stated in fact that *"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."*

(6) Now we come to the true goal of the Platonist interpretation of Epicurus - the contention that Epicurus taught "tranquillism" rather than "hedonism." Think about these words - what does "tranquillism" mean other than "anesthesia," and why use the Greek form "hedonism" (with its derogatory connotations) rather than simply and clearly state that Epicurus taught that **pleasure** is the guide of life?

"And for this cause we call **pleasure** the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize **pleasure** as the first good innate in us, and from **pleasure** we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to **pleasure** we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. And since **pleasure** is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every **pleasure**, but sometimes we pass over many **pleasures**, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than **pleasures**, since a greater **pleasure** comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every **pleasure** then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every **pleasure** is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided."

So the "tranquillists" would have us understand that Epicurus taught that there are no gods to reward us in life, no heaven to reward us in death, that life is short while we are dead for an eternity afterwards, that pleasure is what makes life worth living, but that we are supposed to spend what time we have in what amounts to a drunken stupor, or in an effective coma, because we are so afraid of any amount of pain that we cannot bare the thought of experiencing any pain whatsoever? **No Way.**

We discuss these issues all the time at Epicureanfriends.com, and there are many threads devoted to it, so I'll bring this post to an end. But if you want to add a statuette of Epicurus to your medicine cabinet, right between the aspirin and the oxycodone, and call him out on occasion when you're under some kind of stress that the aspirin won't handle, then by all means follow the lead of the "Epicurus on the Three Obstacles" article and "**knock yourself out.**"

But if you want to find out what Epicurus really taught, pick up Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy" and join for discussion those who are really committed to understanding Epicurus, and plant the explosives that will blow Plato's cave sky-high. And don't worry, the Stoics won't mind if they are caught in the explosion, because they are indifferent to all emotion anyway!