

How To Convert A Neo-Epicurean Into A Classical Epicurean

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2020 at 1:58 PM

Melkor the "ultimate" differences are probably much more in the "ethics" side of things than in the physics, so long as the physics interpretations remain vigorously non-supernatural.

It might be easiest to address your concerns if you have specific areas in mind (just as you mentioned the physics) but I think it is fair to say that we've tried to capture the most important issues in this article here:

[Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean](#)

In Elayne's article here there is more detail on the pleasure aspect: [On Pain, Pleasure, and Happiness \(07/15/19\)](#)

And I think you'll find that the issues that most frequently come to the surface in the ethics are represented by the view on pleasure, which is a matter discussed here: [The Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure Model](#)

It's always interesting and educational for me to discuss this issue, because it does seem like it really isn't as mysterious or difficult to get a handle on as it might appear.

Lately, we've had some discussions that focus me in the direction of seeing that the issue of "happiness" is near to the center. Because the question is "What is happiness?" and what is the relationship of happiness to "virtue" and to "pleasure." Why did Diogenes of Oinoanda feel the need to SHOUT this formulation:

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into “what is the means of happiness?” and they wanted to say “the virtues” (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not “what is the means of happiness?” but “what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?,” I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end.

I do not believe that this passage refers only to the issue of "virtue" but also to ambiguities in the use of the term "happiness" itself. The word "happiness" can mean just about anything to anyone, and is too high-level a concept to be used without explanation, which I think is what Diogenes in Oinoanda was exercised about.

If there is one reliable guide that has stood the test of time in my experience as the most reliable indicator of whether someone is really in tune with the ancient view of Epicurus, or whether that person is in danger of sliding down the slope into the abyss of "NeoEpicureanism" it is the issue of "pleasure." How frequently does the person refer to pleasure, how central a role does the person see "pleasure" to play in Epicurus, and how willing is the person to accept Epicurus' view that pleasure needs no definition, and means exactly what we think it means, and that it does NOT mean (in full) "absence of pain."

It's my experience and view that issues of physics and other questions of "fact" about the workings of nature are ultimately resolvable in good faith so long as there is no opening of the door to supernaturalism. I recognize that there are differences of opinion on some epistemology issues (as to anticipations, and as to "dogmatism," which really revolves around our definitions of "truth" and "certainty" and things like "confidence.") But I think all of those are ultimately resolvable as we study the texts and keep in mind the limitations of "dialectical logic" and "reason abstracted away from the senses." I think most of us who get into Epicurus in the first place at least sense where Epicurus was going in his attacks on Plato and abstract logic, so those issues are resolvable in virtually every case.

But the issue of "pleasure" can be significantly deeper. No doubt there are people who just want to avoid the issue, and use a generic word like "happiness" so as to appeal to wider numbers of people, and I understand and accept their motivation in at least certain circumstances. But there is a limit to what can be achieved to such approach, and the next level of understanding to me hinges on the issue that it is FEELING that is indeed at the center of human life. The issue is not really "types of pleasure" or even "how to achieve pleasures efficiently and safely." The issue really is that Feeling / Pleasure holds the place in Epicurean philosophy that supernatural gods hold in the field of religion, and that "logic" holds in the field of expert academia. The Epicurean Canon is not just a means of achieving the goals that are set by religion and logic, the Epicurean Canon is a FULL REPLACEMENT and FULL COMPETITOR to religion, and to "expert logic." I believe that many people who start out with Epicurus sense that this conflict exists and it is at the root of the controversies, but they are either unwilling to proceed to grapple with it, or else they abandon the field and decide that their flag is either religion or "logic" or some Aristotelian combination of the two.

I'll close for now by repeating that this is very important material to discuss and I hope you'll continue the thread with anything that seems worth discussing.