

How To Convert A Neo-Epicurean Into A Classical Epicurean

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 7:38 PM

I think I really agree with most everything I am reading in Nate's post, and the angle in which I would elaborate on it is the issue of who it is that "we" would constitute in terms of the purpose of Epicureanfriends.com and what "we" are doing in our work here.

The issue of labels is pretty complex so I want to focus on how to apply Nate's points to "us." I consider "us" to be people who are really working to reconnect and extend the work of the original Epicurean school. For whatever reason, even if you want to consider something as mundane as "identifying" with a football or sports team (but I think it's much more profound than that) there is a group of people who really want to focus first on identifying and understanding what Epicurus taught, and then deciding whether they accept it, rather than approaching philosophy as a smorgasbord of offerings from which we can pick and choose at our own time and pace and apply to our own lives as we wish. This latter type of person is primarily eclectic and more interested in consuming and going his or her own way, and I really have no issue with that. To each his own and all that. For search a person the term "neoEpicurean" should not be seen as offensive because he's no more or less neoEpicurean than he is neoStoic or NeoAristelian or anything else.

Then there are those of us who are content to focus on one school so we can really learn it, and we get more pleasure out of swimming in a single school than constantly flitting in different directions. There are apparently both kinds of fish in the world, and I don't think either path is inherently inferior or superior. But for those of us who are convinced that swimming in a single school is our most efficient path toward what we perceive to be our desired goal, it is much more important to understand the core issues and have consistent positions that can be used to evaluate new and different issues, than it is to constantly interchange among and between schools searching to choose what we may think is "the best from each" before we have really become persuaded that we know what "the best" really is.

So in reconnecting with the original Epicurean school there are benefits and pitfalls in spending significant time in talking about competing viewpoints. Some people enjoy that and insist on it, but I am convinced that many people find that to be distracting and distasteful - they want to focus on "one thing at a time" and understand it as completely as possible before they move on to something else.

So I guess what I am saying is that I don't see the issue of "neo-Epicurean" as necessarily a put-down, though clearly it can have that connotation IF you start from the position that consistency is a virtue. That's really the point - the "neo-Epicureans" are not generally as nearly

concerned about consistency as some other people are, so their standard of what can be incorporated is a lot wider than is the standard of some other people.

For me, it is easy to look at anyone who wants to talk about issues in physics and say "so long as your issues are still within the strictly natural explanations of the universe, and you do not open the door to the supernatural, then your discussions are fine and I am sure Epicurus would have approved."

But that's kind of begging the question, because the harder issues (or so that is my disposition) are in ethics and epistemology, and that's where efforts to incorporate what might be called "psychology" are much more fraught with danger, because it's the "direction" of the other philosophies that cause the major incompatibilities.

I think I'll stop for the moment. The real litmus-test / "explosive" issues are getting pretty well fleshed out - they include:

1 - the strict rejection of all supernatural theories

2 - the strict rejection of life after death

3 - the insistence on the central role of feeling (pleasure and pain, widely understood) in constituting the goal of life (which people call "happiness")

4 - the recognition that because pleasure is the only standard given by nature of what to choose is pleasure, all other considerations (virtue, revelation, etc) are subservient to pleasure.

5 - the recognition that pleasure and pain are not limited to immediate bodily sensations but include EVERYTHING we find desirable in life for itself, whether "bodily" or mental/emotional/spiritual or whatever name you want to attach to it.

6 - the epistemological emphasis on the three categories of the canon as primary over logic/reason,

There are as Joshua said a lot more things to include, but these continue to be the hot button issues.

One more thing in relation to "logic" - I think there is a lot to be gained from exploring the intersection of logic and physics more closely. The reason I regularly push back on the "eternal" universe issue is that I think that this involves a choice that Epicurus saw as essential to human psychology and to defeating skepticism. We are always going to want more information than is available to us, and I don't think we yet appreciate that this was a key to Epicurus as it was. We're not EVER going to solve questions of "origin of the universe" because we cannot go back in time and "see" what happened ourselves, so there will always be doubt. And I think Epicurus held that this is an issue of "logic" or however you want to frame the mental question: "How do you live with questions that are important but to which you will never really know a 'final'

answer?"

And I think when we drill into the texts on epistemology what emerges is a kind of attitude toward "confidence" that has to take precedence in the end over "let's go look for the person who is most 'expert' in physics and ask him what he thinks." We may be here talking about some of DeWitt's comments about Epicurean versions of "faith" or we may be talking about the details of Philodemus "On Methods of Inference," or we may be talking about something else, but ultimately there are implications of the conflict between "logic" and "the Epicurean canon" in which Epicurus seems to advise (and I think I agree) that the canon must be held to supercede and call a halt to unending skepticism and possibilities for questioning on issues like infinity and eternity.

I won't go further with that now but I think it relates to the issue of how wide a net we can cast in talking productively about other philosophies and incorporating their teachings. Maybe the point is that to Epicurus I don't think it was any more important to know everything there is to know about competing philosophies than it is to know everything about physics. For most people all we can do is grasp the basic outlines of the issues, form a conclusion about the general issue, and go with it. So the first task of the ancient Epicurean school seems to have been to educate its people on all of the fundamental issues, show them in general why their position was superior, educate them to the general attacks they would receive and how to respond to them, and then go out and live as "happily" as possible.