

An Exchange with Haris Dimitriadis on Pleasure vs Ataraxia

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2020 at 8:57 AM

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Haris Dimitriadis:

Epicurus seems to identify pleasure with ataraxia (freedom from disturbance and anxiety) in the soul and freedom from pain in the body and consequently to claim that it is equivalent to say that the end of life is pleasure or ataraxia and aponia. This approach brought a lot of confusion to his followers, like me, and raised intense objections by his opponents since one could have peace of mind more easily by following an ascetic life rather than a pleasant life. I felt that there is a sperm of truth in these objections to Epicurus and I also used to be uncomfortable with

treating the notion of ataraxia as the norm of a happy life. Thinking about this issue, accidentally, an idea crossed my mind and I would appreciate your comments on that. Well, what I come here to suggest is that ataraxia and pleasure are related notions but they are not identical. This is obvious for the reason that pleasure is a feeling and ataraxia is a state of the mind.

The feeling is a result of the state of the mind but it is not the state of the mind. Their relation is that of the cause and effect. The right interpretation is to say that the maximum pleasure occurs when our minds are free from disturbance. The end is the maximization of pleasure and ataraxia is the state of the mind when this end occurs. What, I suggest, in short, is that it is wrong to say that both pleasure and ataraxia are the ends of life. Instead, it is right to say that the end of life is the maximization of pleasure (and the simultaneous minimization of pain) and that the maximum (peak) of this feeling is brought about when I find my mind free of worries, that is when I have no desires unfulfilled.

This may seem a negligible issue but I think it solves many of the controversies surrounding our philosophy and opens new perspectives in our lives.

RW:

Thanks for putting forward the discussion point, here's my contribution.

Epicurus in 'On Choice and Avoidance', as recorded by Diogenes Laertius:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1546-an-exchange-with-haris-dimitriadis-on-pleasure-vs-ataraxia/?postID=7571#post7571>

'Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest' - this was my state of mind when reflecting upon the bounty from the garden.

'Joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity' - this was my state of mind during the months it took to nurture the plants.

Haris:

Yes, but peace of mind and freedom from pain are not pleasure at all. They are not emotions. Neither in action nor in rest.

Elli:

Please, dear my fellow men, be careful of the duration of this "rest" since there is the probability of a danger to become as apathy and lethargy. 😊

Cassius:

Haris: When you say "This is obvious for the reason that pleasure is a feeling and ataraxia is a state of the mind. The feeling is a result of the state of the mind but it is not the state of the mind."

In your second sentence do you really mean the reverse? "The state of mind is a result of the feeling, but is not the feeling."

Is not pleasure, the feeling, the primary and driving force of Nature, while "ataraxia" is something (a concept or name invented by men, such as "happiness" or "eudaemonia") that can be used simply as a convenience as a description of the result of filling the experience of the person with pleasures, to a maximum, such that all remaining pain is driven out from that person's experience?

I think that my question is stating what you are saying here, and with this I fully agree:

"What, I suggest, in short, is that it is wrong to say that both pleasure and ataraxia are the ends of life. Instead, it is right to say that the end of life is the maximization of pleasure (and the simultaneous minimization of pain) and that the maximum (peak) of this feeling is brought about when I find my mind free of worries, that is when I have no desires unfulfilled."

And I do not believe this to be a negligible issue at all, but a very good description of the reason we spin our wheels and rarely get traction in advancing the philosophy to new people, because we are hopelessly caught up in a conceptual abstraction (ataraxia, eudaemonia, happiness) when we should always have been following Epicurus strictly and been focusing on the pursuit of the feeling of pleasure, with all these derivative terms clearly identified as derivatives, not the primary driving issue, on which Epicurus was always very clear:

that since there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, the precise way of describing the goal of living at any particular moment is always the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain, not the achievement of conceptual ideas which are constructs of the human mind that we use only for convenience ("ataraxia", "eudaemonia," "happiness")

Haris:

I do agree Cassius that is a huge issue that undermines the very essence of our philosophy. Who would show an interest in a philosophy that sets as purpose of life tranquillity and painlessness. The next question to such a position would be, and then what. I have of peace of mind and so what do I do next. After 15 years of studying and writing on Epicurus I am confused as to what I should pursue first in my life: tranquility or pleasure.

The problem is that Epicurus himself in his letter to Menoeceus raised this dispute by equating pleasure to ataraxia and we should put things in order.

Elayne:

Haris!!! That is almost exactly what we have been saying here, but with a slight difference that I think will help you-- absence of pain is not a description of pleasure. There is only pain or pleasure, no true neutral feeling, just like only atoms or void. Ataraxia and aponia are without pains of mind and body-- but those words themselves do not describe anything-- like "without void" doesn't describe matter, even though where void is absent, there is matter.

If I say I am atheist, it doesn't tell you what I do believe.

I think part of this is that in modern times, we think of tranquility as a feeling. But the original word just means the absence of disturbance-- absence of pain.

When we understand that, the letter to Menoeceus is perfectly clear. There is no conflict in the philosophy at all. Our goal is definitely pleasure!

What an exciting thing to wake up and read your post!!!

This issue you raise is why I rolled my eyes at the modern version of this philosophy at first. I had come to a partial version of the actual philosophy on my own, and I thought Epicurus was a tranquilist. But that was because I was reading about him from authors who didn't understand him. When I read the core texts, I realized-- aha! This man was about pleasure! He figured it out!

This is so extremely important-- it is why we have been harping on it again and again. Unless the philosophy is understood this way, it doesn't even hold together-- it would be internally incoherent. But once you see this part, everything works perfectly.

Haris:

Thank you Elayne, it is great pleasure to read your post. I fully agree with you. The reason I raised this issue is that it is the main objection to Epicurus raised even from the time of the Cyrenaics, Cicero and the contemporary philosophers. I thought, it must be something serious for so many great minds to disagree with it. Remember that some had resembled the Epicurean life as the life of a corpse. Indeed, peace of mind is a very vague expression. It reminds the Buddhist nirvana, the Christian asceticism, not to mention, idleness, laziness and so forth. If we all agree on the true Epicurean telos then we should work collectively to clear things out.

Elayne:

Well, isn't that what enemies do-- create straw men to fight? All these opponents of Epicurus couldn't argue against his philosophy, because it was solid. So they made up a fake version and argued against that. And then woe to us, now so-called Epicureans are taking up the fake version and promoting it! But we have been fighting that here and on Cassius' page.

Cassius:

Haris as to "The problem is that Epicurus himself in his letter to Menoecus raised this dispute by equating pleasure to ataraxia and we should put things in order." The best explanation that I have been able to identify is that these passages by Epicurus were intended to address the "limit" argument most notably put forward by Plato in [Philebus](#), where he argued that pleasure cannot be the good because pleasure allegedly has no limit. The use of these limited passages to justify the argument that pleasure EQUALS "absence of pain" in every respect is in my view a gross misinterpretation never intended by Epicurus, nor possible when the rest of his views are taken into account, especially when considering PD3, which makes clear that the relationship between pleasure and absence of pain is the relationship of "limit of QUANTITY..."

I have summarized my references on this point in the essay linked below. More important than that, however, if you have not read them I highly recommend the articles by Boris [Nikolsky](#) ("Epicurus on Pleasure") and the Epicurus chapter in Gosling and Taylor's "Greeks on Pleasure." Those are linked in the article and are excellent because they help us with the academically-respectable analysis of the history of this argument that comes to the same conclusion that we have - that the majority consensus is very wrong.

<https://epicurusmagazine.com/the-full-cup-f...cassius-amicus/>

Haris:

Yes, I agree that a letter is not the proper place to explain a philosophy and for reasons of limited space and time one has to use shortcuts and generalizations. Unfortunately we do not have a full book written by Epicurus and he have to make guesses and most commonly to make misinterpretations.

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