

Episode Thirty - Only A Limited Number of Combinations of Atoms Is Possible

Post by "Don" of August 7, 2020 at 10:31 PM

This was a lively one!

I feel compelled to weigh in on the life of your fictitious scientist. I don't think one can just say that the pursuit of science bringing the scientist pleasure is the end of it. I seem to hear you saying that pleasure is the goal; the scientist experiences pleasure; that's it.

That's not the only aspect of the scientist's life we need to worry about. I agree that if the pursuit of science brings them pleasure, that's fine. But it cannot be the whole story and negate the need for the possession of a philosophy of life.

I would ask What is the totality of their life? How are they living it? Are they just? Are they making decisions to bring sustained pleasure to their whole life? The moment-by-moment experience of pleasure while researching or contemplating their scientific pursuit is not the goal. It is living a sustained pleasurable life. That's why Epicurus stressed that sometimes we should experience pain for the sake of later pleasure, and why we should abstain from some pleasure for more pleasure later.

It's not necessarily 24x7x365 immersion in pleasurable feelings all the time for your average human, Epicurean or not. The importance of a framework or philosophy of life is how you deal with life when it isn't providing pleasure. How do you return to that? How do you react when someone close to you dies? How do you experience hardship, disease, disappointment, and so on?

If experiencing individual pleasures is the only goal, and we come to this naturally (as I understand some of you were saying in this episode), of what use is Epicurus and his philosophy? If experiencing pleasure is the only important aspect of Epicureanism, and we naturally do this anyway, of what use is the philosophy at all? I have other things I could fill my time with.

I keep coming back to PD 10's "IF." IF the pleasure of the profligate dispelled their fears and anxieties, we'd have no quarrel with them. But their pleasures DON'T dispel their fears. But they're experiencing pleasure, so it's all okay then? I have to say no to that. I don't think that's the goal Epicurus taught. They are not living a life that can be sustained in pleasure. Now, if they were demonstrating they understood how to make prudent decisions to sustain their pleasure, that death is nothing to them and why, etc., and not simply running after every pleasure all the time, then, yeah, go forth and seize the day. I don't think that's what the "lost" (to translate the original word) are doing.

Likewise, the Letter to Menoikos:

Quote

So **when we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent people or the enjoyment of sleep**, as is believed by those who are ignorant or who don't understand us or who are ill-disposed to us, but to be free from bodily pain and mental disturbance. For **a pleasant life is produced not by drinking and endless parties and enjoying boys and women and consuming fish and other delicacies of an extravagant table, but by sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject, and driving out opinions that cause the greatest trouble in the soul.**

So the scientist's finding pleasure or joy in their work is fine as far as it goes. One should not tell them to stop. But pleasure or joy in that one thing is not the entirety of life.