

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

Post by "Elayne" of August 10, 2020 at 12:02 PM

Ok, just getting to this... let me give a more complete description of my perspective.

I disagree with Don that it is inferior if a scientist makes pleasure primarily out of doing research, vs some broader collection of pleasures. If that is the most reliable pleasure for the scientist, why wouldn't she choose it? "Moment-by-moment" pleasures can create an overall pleasurable life. I do not think comparing science and profligacy makes sense-- they are nowhere near the same. But I have an implicit assumption here which I need to make clear-- I am talking about a real scientist, one who understands the use of evidence the same way Epicurus did-- because that is science. Such a person would not have supernatural fears or be prone to non-evidence based contagious social ideas in the first place, because of having a scientific approach. That is the person's immunity to being dragged off track away from pleasure.

My scientist was not really hypothetical. My dad is a retired physicist and my mother was a mathematician. I never knew anyone who only did science, lol, but I grew up surrounded by scientists and their families, and they were among the happiest (meaning, for me, experiencing sustained pleasure) people I knew. They were not beset by superstition... but they were not explicitly philosophers either. Many of them spent long waking hours pursuing their research projects. They all had families whom they enjoyed spending time with as well, and like my dad, they often spent family time teaching their children about science. Some of my most pleasurable memories involve my dad teaching me physics, from early childhood. It was a central pleasure, which seems to me very similar to Epicurus' instructions about studying nature with friends.

I observe that if a person is securely absent supernatural beliefs, they often tend to intuitively do the hedonic calculus, and they are often quite skilled without a sense that they have a philosophy. And if they have lived a long life making wise choices but have not formally written down or thought out a philosophy, I am very resistant to saying their happy lives were just due to blind luck. No-- they were happy due to their understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure).

As an adult, I have met non-scientist atheists who understood just enough about science to feel secure in rejecting un-evidenced notions and social fads, and I have observed that these people, over time, develop great skill in choosing pleasure-- but they are not philosophers. This evidence, right in front of me, prevents me from making assertions that someone must have a

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philosophy to wisely choose a pleasurable life.

Epicurus was able to develop his philosophy because it (IMO) is the only one you can have if you are a scientist and pay attention to reality. No other philosophy holds up at all, under scrutiny.

My personal experience was to have been raised with a strong science foundation, and that was what helped me avoid ideas that make no sense, like Skepticism and various idealisms. I did not have doubt about these things being wrong. My natural enjoyment of pleasure became my guide. So when I read Epicurus, I had joy to find someone who had the same perspectives, like a friend from long ago... but even before I found him and before I saw how he had beautifully put together the structure of his philosophy, I had learned to make wise choices for my life. I also had joy in realizing I could find other people who thought about life as I did, by looking for Epicureans. I am extremely glad I found Epicurus-- but I was also already practicing the philosophy without calling it one, and it was functioning well.

As far as obstacles go, for me they have not been alternative philosophies and superstitions but normal griefs of life-- which I feel fully when they come up. I am not afraid of my feelings, and similar to Epicurus I would say that the most severe griefs do not last in their most intense form very long, and the milder griefs are not difficult to cope with, when one focuses on activities that bring pleasure-- for me, the main antidote to grief is social pleasures. Hugging my friends and family, singing together, eating and talking together, etc. I have had many griefs in life, and that is what has worked for me-- I don't tend to philosophize about grief. Often pleasure is strong even after losses, when I think about how fortunate I was to have known and loved the person who is now gone, and take time to remember them. I find pleasure in the sensation of poignancy and nostalgia.

What I'm wondering if I hear in Don's words-- and maybe not, [Don](#) -- please correct me if I'm wrong-- is an implication that pleasures must not just be sustained but somehow of a superior type, perhaps what I call a "meaning project", and I disagree with that. Some people do require a meaning project for pleasure, but not everyone does. It is a matter of temperament and likely neurology. But I strongly disagree that there are inferior and superior pleasures, if the pleasures are truly equivalent in their fullness. There are no trivial vs important pleasures. That is idealism and abstract thinking creeping in. Then you wind up with people saying things like "we should not try to have pleasure but meaningfulness"-- but what is meaningfulness without pleasure? What is beauty? Why would anyone want any of these things without the pleasure in them?

It is quite possible to intuitively understand and practice this without ever being a philosopher, and I've seen it done and don't even think it is extraordinarily rare. We don't see those folks on our philosophy forums, because they probably don't even know it is a thing, but they are out there enjoying life.