

Interesting Article on Epicurus and Aesthetics

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2020 at 7:05 AM

Thank you for posting this Don! As I started off reading it I was distinctly unimpressed, probably because the term "aesthetic disinterestedness" seems to me to be a put-off. Even as I now finish the article I don't think that term has a helpful ring to it. I would advise someone reading the article to put that discussion about modern attitudes to the side, and just focus on the part which discusses Epicurus and Lucretius directly. And in that part I think there is some very valuable material as you indicate. I clipped a few passages which I may paste but I think the bottom line is that the writer is observing that Epicurus was emphasizing that experiencing art is a pleasure and is therefore something desirable, but that commenting or critiquing or maybe just "talking about art" is not of the same category and does not bring the same pleasure. I think the point goes further from not simply not bringing pleasure, but actually being harmful in some way. All in all a very valuable article but I had to put aside this "disinterestedness" word. Maybe I can reframe it in my mind as something like "aesthetic disinterested discussion is bad" but that would probably be overbroad.

could be used to explain the Epicurean treatment of art very neatly. The desire to hear pleasant sounds and to see pleasant sights is a natural one, as human nature is inclined towards the pleasure. A wise man would visit festivals and enjoy them more than anyone else because the wise man would adopt a perfectly adequate attitude towards this experience: as something valuable purely for the pleasure derived from the sensual perception of the arts.³³ The wise man would not, however, turn pursuit of the arts into an empty desire, that is, into the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, as this is simply what the arts are not capable of doing.

Different topic, but this is a quote that is helpful for the many times someone contends that absence of pain is some kind of generic attitude which is superior to pleasure:

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Also related to other issues but very important:

'Epicurus is comfortable with the idea of luxury as something that any reasonable person might choose if offered it. What he rejects, again, is both its puritanical disavowal and its strenuous pursuit. His classification of luxury as an object of empty desire reflects his attitude toward the latter conjunct; it does not entail the former.'³⁶

I agree with this on the meaning of empty. If it is an "idiom" in Greek then that is fine, but this is why I don't like to use "empty" in English, because if the meaning is "harmful" or "dysfunctional" then it is better to simply say so, and not use an english word "empty" that does not mean harmful and dysfunctional.