

Can Emotions be Trusted?

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 7, 2020 at 8:58 AM

Epicureanism is unique among classical schools of philosophy in its regard for emotions as a source of guidance and wisdom, even over reason. From DeWitt, pg. 23, we have:

“...two opposing interpretations of the phrase “living according to Nature.” To the Stoics, who hitched their wagon to Plato’s star, it signified the imitation of the inflexible celestial order by a rigid unemotional morality. To Epicurus and the Epicureans, “living according to Nature,” though they never made a slogan of it, signifies living according to the laws of our being. Of this being the emotions were recognized as a normal and integral part, undeserving of suspicion or distrust.”

I’m struggling with the idea that emotions can be trusted as a clear guide towards what will confer the greatest pleasure/happiness. It seems to me we have all learned that we must use reason to overcome emotions constantly in order to avoid negative repercussions. There are so many instances of emotions that should not inform behaviour or decision-making, that I can hardly think of any that can be trusted. Our natural instincts are generally pretty dreadful, as evidenced by the mistakes of our youth! Think of the most emotional people you know. Are they also the happiest? Surely not.

My question is when, and in what sense, can our natural emotions ever be trusted as a guide for behaviour?