

On "Seizing The Day"

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2019 at 11:51 AM

Thanks to Martin Kalyniuk for forwarding a link to an article about the poet Horace's well known phrase, "carpe diem." Because we're trying to keep the group aware of controversies in Epicurean interpretation, we need to point out that this is a link that needs to be considered with a strong dose of caution. It's the point of the article to argue that "carpe diem" shouldn't be considered to mean "seize the day" in an active aggressive action, but rather that it evokes "the plucking and gathering of ripening fruits or flowers, enjoying a moment that is rooted in the sensory experience of nature." The author also cites the familiar "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may" phrase. In other words, according to the author, Horace allegedly doesn't call us to action, but to "a far gentler, more sensual image than the rather forceful and even violent concept of seizing the moment."

There are many facets to translation issues, and it may very well be that Horace would say that his phrase had multiple meanings, including the one suggested by the article. However, to just enjoy sensations at suitable moments (e.g. while we walk through a park) does not mean that we should not take resolute action at other times when we pursue opportunities for hard work to assure future pleasures.

This article has a strong scent of being part of a widespread tendency to reduce Epicurean philosophy to a campaign against modern consumerist society. No one here (that I know of) advocates "consumerism," but to reduce the the philosophy to that issue alone trivializes it.

About Horace himself, Wikipedia says: "An officer in the republican army defeated at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC, he was befriended by Octavian's right-hand man in civil affairs, Maecenas, and became a spokesman for the new regime."

That is not a description of a wallflower who hides in his cave gathering pretty mushrooms. That is a description of a man of action, who may not have been thrilled with the results of the war in which he had fought, but by no means decided to sit and sulk, and made an entirely new and productive career for himself afterwards. Not the type of many to complain about "consumerism," but the type of man to "do something about it" if he had a problem.

In addition, it isn't clear why the author would think "pluck" is not an action word-- if you are plucking flowers, you are doing something - you aren't simply meditating like some would advocate.

It's not our goal to buy things we don't enjoy (or refrain from buying what we enjoy) just for competition, whether that's a competition to accumulate or minimize possessions. What we want is to choose the pleasure out of the offerings of the day, to pluck the pleasure and leave

behind the rot.

Sometimes the wonderful flowers will have thorns but still be worth plucking... sometimes it's all flower. Then there's the planting and tending, for future flowers of pleasure.

But there's definitely a need to pluck whatever is in full flower now, not delay. Those flowers of pleasure don't last forever!

Here's the link and now you have the argument with which to keep it in perspective. Articles like this preaching passivism in the name of Epicurus are all over the place. Be careful of calls to inaction and don't let them get you down, instead - Seize the day!

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