

An Approach to Reading Philosophy

Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 9:20 AM

I have noticed that many of the controversies about Epicurean Philosophy seem to come down to decisions about how to read the words of each person who wrote about it.

This is not only in regards to reliability of documents (is an author correctly assigned? Was this a fragment removed from a context that would change it?) and translation issues but the reader’s own attitude towards the documents.

I am going to describe my own approach, and I'm interested in hearing how others here are doing it and why.

My rough outline of the process is:

1. The starting place is and was, before I ever knew about Epicurus, knowledge of current accepted physics, in which there is no place for the supernatural or ideal realms-- no position of absolute or objective observation. Physics therefore includes biology, so I'm including my knowledge of observed biological nature. My observations by studying nature led me to the same conclusions as Epicurus, including the goal of pleasure, the lack of absolute moral standards, and how we perceive reality subjectively. My understanding of the components of this subjective perception include the senses and instrumental extensions including supercolliders and such (adding more senses that were unknown in his time, such as sense of magnetic fields), feelings of pain and pleasure, and innate pattern recognitions. I see logic and reasoning as tools, not as contacts with reality.
2. I used this starting point to evaluate Epicurus. I had already evaluated and discarded several other philosophies and religions because they conflicted with reality. When I read the PDs, the VS, and the letters, I had an immediate flash of recognition that he understood the basic nature of reality. I did not find that the minor errors, such as his description of the sun, undid his basic approach of understanding reality is material and how we perceive it, because all of the ethics derives from that platform. When he explains, for instance, that the stomach has a limit, and from this observation we know that desire is NOT insatiable, I knew I had “found my man”, because I had experienced satiation as a pleasure myself.
3. Once I decided Epicurus was credible, I was able to learn from him about how to organize my own philosophy into a solid structure. I also benefited from his specific observations on how pleasure can be obtained under various conditions, and from his example of living pleasurably and teaching his friends to do the same. I experience tremendous pleasure from knowing he existed and put his knowledge of reality to such pleasurable use. He set an example for me of

how to live and how to stand firm against opponents of pleasure. He provided defenses against them that I had not thought of.

4. I evaluate every philosopher and researcher who writes about Epicurus in the same manner-- is what this person is saying c/w reality? If not, they are wrong and I disregard their conclusions. If so, perhaps they will say something that enhances my ability to gain pleasure, by their observations.

5. Although I haven't done this myself, there is a separate process of historical accuracy research. Comparing sources, for instance. However, if it turns out Epicurus did not understand reality and our perceptions of it accurately after all-- if it turns out that he recommended a state no one would actually experience as fully pleasurable, for instance-- then I would put him in the group of incorrect philosophers and stop calling myself an Epicurean.

This process differs substantially from a religious type of reading, where one would feel they had to read everything written about Epicurus by others to be an Epicurean, rather than evaluate his own writings first hand from personal experience. It also differs from a situation where one does not have their own philosophy based on reality but is inserting bits of idealism here and there and then cherry picks quotes to support their own idealism as Epicurean.

The primary basis for my philosophy is reality, and I would just call it "The Philosophy of Reality"-- it is reality I use to test everything else against. I assert that any person who is capable of understanding the nature of reality properly can come to the same basics of philosophy, even if they've never read Epicurus at all. This person should be able to read any writing from any source and say whether it agrees with reality or not. I would find such a person like-minded with me.

This type of likemindedness -- a shared agreement on the nature of reality-- is far more important to me than what someone calls themselves. I can recognize such people by what they say and also by how they read philosophy.

I call myself an Epicurean because I have adopted his specific way of organizing my own philosophy after finding it both accurate and useful, and because of my intense admiration for his insights and life.

In summary, if a person does not have a strong personal understanding of the basic nature of reality, they will never be able to develop a stable and accurate philosophy, and their chances of having a pleasurable life are reduced. They will read philosophy looking for authority figures or confirmation of idealism. They will find themselves pushed around by idealism and will thus likely make more choices against their own pleasurable life. A person completely ignorant of philosophy and idealism but with an intuitive grasp of pleasure would have a far better chance, but because idealism is rampant, used as a tool to control others, a strong philosophy of reality is critical as a self defense.

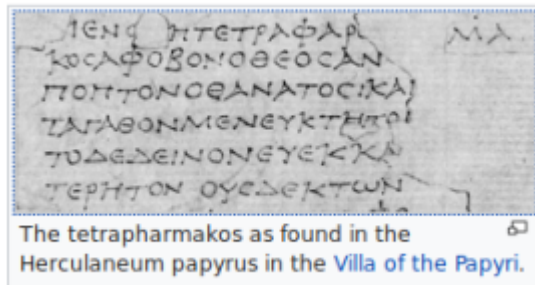
Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2019 at 4:05 PM

I did not know that about Hicks, Oscar, thank you. I do think I had noticed that Hicks seemed to have a Stoic disposition, and that personal detail may indicate something of relevance.

I think your point is relevant to all the texts but in particular to those from Herculaneum. As I understand it everyone is working from penciled notes made in most cases by some of the original researchers years ago, in which each character is transcribed to something new, such as the facsimile on this page:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetrapharmakos>

...meaning that this caption of this photo is certainly NOT accurate:



but rather what the photo shows is the sketched reconstruction of the researchers -- the original is charred black.

Now for all I know the reconstructionist had the best eyesight and the best knowledge of ancient greek and the best understanding of Epicurus humanly possible -- but I suspect that on all those counts skepticism is warranted. But even if so, this facsimile does not tell us the degree to which these characters were clear, or surmised, and of course there is no context whatsoever before or after this passage. We simply don't know who was writing this, or why, and so to take from this facsimile as if it was handed down from heaven:

.....seems to me to be something very careful about, especially since it is the natural human tendency to scrutinize each word for subtleties of meaning which we simply cannot be sure where intended by the original Epicureans.

So in this case we have to check these transcriptions and translations about other parts of Epicurean philosophy about which we have confidence, and yes the suggested translation is reasonably possible. But it is at best a truncated version of the first four doctrines, and what do we know about how and for what purpose this truncation was derived? Was someone suggesting that this is all that was important to know? Was that person suggesting that this was *most* important? For whom was this summary intended?

All these questions have to be considered in all of the translations, and Elayne's suggestions are pretty much exactly the way I approach things too.

Don't fear god,	Ἄφοβον ὁ θεός,
Don't worry about death;	ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος
What is good is easy to get,	καὶ τὰγαθὸν μὲν εὐκτῆτον,
What is terrible is easy to endure	τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐκαρτέρητον

Post by “Elli” of December 31, 2019 at 4:38 PM

τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐεκαρτέρητον

the translation in english is "what is terrible is easy to endure", but the word "καρτέρι" in greek means the "ambush".

e.g. The commandment ordered them to fire from ambush.

So, the phrase in english could be "what is terrible is easy, because you're waiting to attack" IF you have a strategy on how to attack, since you do not forget your goal that is pleasure.

However, this little phrase can be connected with the Epicurus's epistle which is addressed to Idomeneus, inciting him to rush as soon as possible and escape, before a stronger force interferes and deprives him of the freedom to withdraw. But he also adds that no one would attempt anything, except only when he can attempt it in the appropriate conditions and with the appropriate opportunity. But when the expected opportunity comes, we must be ready to grab it. Epicurus forbids us to stay idle, when we think about fleeing, and gives us the hope of a way out even from the most difficult situations, as long as we are not in a hurry before our time and do not hesitate when the right one comes.

Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2019 at 7:16 PM

Elli when you get a chance - how would you render the full set of lines in that picture in English?