

Reducing "Tranquilism" to its Absurd Conclusion

Post by "Cassius" of February 29, 2020 at 6:38 AM

The following article "[Crying Out In Despair](#)" came up in my google news feed, and I think it makes a point worth noting: the ultimate end of the "Tranquilism" approach to understanding Epicurus is absurdity.

The writer cites Catherine Wilson as advocating "organizing your sock drawer" as an example of finding meaning in life. Is this an unfair criticism of Wilson's position? I don't really think so, because this kind of "meaningfulness" is indeed what she seems to end up advocating, because she does not consistently and forthrightly advocate "pleasure" as the goal.

I haven't finished reading Wilson's book (and for this very reason - that I don't find many of her articulation of Epicurus' position on pleasure to be persuasive). Yet from the parts I have read I also think ironically that she is indeed one of the better Epicurean book-writers out there today, in that she does not fall into this tranquilism trap as far as do many others.

But when people are out there advocating inanities like "Christ is the antidote to depressing diagnoses," the response that is called for is not "tranquilism" and its logical conclusion of lowering your goals in life to the level of sock-drawer-organizing. This is biting criticism, and it is valid against the "tranquillist" position -- which a thorough reading of the texts establishes is **not** what Epicurus advocated.

Crying out in despair

Christ is the antidote to depressing diagnoses

by Marvin Olasky

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Beware the Ides of March, ancient Romans used to say, but Catherine Wilson's *How to Be an Epicurean* (Basic, 2019) would have us, as we become ancient, beware every day. That's because one of her heroes is Lucretius, the ancient Roman materialist who considered the absence of pain and fear to be the greatest pleasure—and the old, facing both, would have “hearts ranked with anxiety.”

Epicureans advised us to think of death as “sleep,” but Wilson realizes the inadequacy of that: “If I believed I would not awaken tomorrow, my pleasure in today would be quickly forgotten.” Her supposed solution: “What makes life feel meaningful is doing what you are able to do to a certain standard that you set for yourself, caring for those whom you like and love and being cared for by them. You can enjoy a gratifying sense of accomplishment.”

Hmm. When Wilson tries to bring her abstractions to ground level, she becomes ludicrous: “The exercise of craftsmanship, whether it's putting together your lawnmower out of the box or organizing your sock drawer, brings order and beauty into the world.” That seems like a movie scene in which a character, slowly going insane, organizes and reorganizes her socks.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 7, 2020 at 12:15 AM

Yesterday I gave George Santayana's Lucretius essay a quick read. (<http://monadnock.net/santayana/lucretius.html>)

It had a few good observations, but was quite hostile toward Epicurus. It occurs to me that it's a great example of the conclusions one might reach if considering EP to be "tranquilism". Maybe the most pertinent quote is:

"Epicurus had been a pure and tender moralist, but pusillanimous. He was so afraid of hurting and of being hurt, so afraid of running risks or tempting fortune, that he wished to prove that human life was a brief business, not subject to any great transformations, nor capable of any great achievements".

The essay is full of similar drivel. Reading the essay makes me suspect that Santayana hadn't the courage to live in the world which Epicurus so aptly described. But I know nothing more of Santayana.

Post by “Cassius” of March 7, 2020 at 6:35 AM

Yes is it very hostile. I only got through the first part.

I can sympathize and agree with him if he is attacking "tranquilism" if he interprets it as running from pain, but I gather that his deeper disagreement is his preference for "reason" over feeling:

*To discover substance, then, is a great step **in the life of reason**, even if substance be conceived quite negatively as a term that serves merely to mark, by contrast, the unsubstantiality, the vanity, of all particular moments and things.*

Post by “Godfrey” of March 7, 2020 at 1:31 PM

Exactly.

If I'm not mistaken I originally found this essay on Peter Saint-Andres Monadnock page and therefore expected it to be in agreement with Epicurus/Lucretius (it's no longer there, not sure why). Imagine my surprise as I worked my way through it!

I lump this essay with 1) Plato's [Philebus](#) and 2) the various statements condemning atomism as impossible and ridiculous. These belong to a group that is so obviously biased and mistaken that the only value in reading them is to strengthen, by contrast, one's conviction regarding feeling and science. Otherwise it's a waste of time (although [Philebus](#) does have value to the extent that it prompted a response from Epicurus).

Post by “Cassius” of March 7, 2020 at 2:25 PM

Yes it is an interesting subject of how much time to devote to the anti-Epicurean literature, especially in discussing it with people who really don't have much fair grounding in Epicurus in the first place.

On balance I have found it very helpful to me personally, in that once I read DeWitt and began to see what the issues really were, then these attacks on Epicurus, especially the older ones, began to make more clear to me what was really at issue in the argument, which is pretty obscured today since everyone things approximately along the same Platonic/Stoic lines.

In discussing pleasure while attacking Epicurus, the issues involved in pleasure in particular and feeling in general become easier to pick out.

I can understand how people going through trials in life, which is a time when people tend to pick up philosophy books, will see "absence of pain" as an attractive phrase, and they'll think it is directly related to Stoic "mind over emotion" material, and they'll just essentially stop, like a person with a headache taking an aspirin and thinking nothing further about the aspirin.

But that totally misses the point, and if it WERE the point, then 98% of these articles attacking Epicurus would never have been written. Cicero and the stoics and other key attackers were "right" to see how big a thread Epicurus was to them, because the issue isn't a better form of anesthetic, the issue is essentially *everything* about how we see the world and decide to live our lives, especially when we are young and healthy and vibrant and looking to decide how to spend our lives.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 7, 2020 at 3:19 PM

I totally agree: once one gets a proper understanding of the philosophy it makes the idealist viewpoint look silly.

Have to point out though that one needn't be young and healthy and vibrant to benefit!

Which leads me to the rumination that perhaps EP is a particularly nice fit for one who is older. Not only does life experience provide additional verification, but there's a certain joy in aging well which meshes nicely with EP. And as the end gets nearer it's nice to have your facts straight.

Post by “Cassius” of March 7, 2020 at 4:21 PM

Yep!

Quote

And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away.

Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come.