

10-Minute Talk Given at Library Conference: Epicurean Librarians and Stoics in the Stacks

Post by “Don” of April 2, 2020 at 10:25 AM

At the risk of inviting some frank speech, I thought I'd share the 10-minute talk I gave last October at our state's library conference to several hundred people as part of a "lightning round" of four talks on topics of interest to librarians and other library staff. The title was:

[Epicurean Librarians and Stoics in the Stacks](#) (click link for PDF)

...and here's the description as it appeared in the conference program: *Epicurean Librarians and Stoics in the Stacks*. Can we learn anything from ancient philosophy about working in a 21st-century library? This LIBChat will offer food for thought on how to engage your patrons and approach your work from a 2000-year-old perspective. Core Competency: Customer Service

Reading back over it before I posted, I can see **multiple** things I'd change or revise. I noticed right away my use of "Epicureanism" and have read heated discussions on this forum about the use of that word as opposed to "Epicurean philosophy". I probably would also have limited my quotations to Epicurean ones, but, at the time thought I'd hit a wider audience including Stoics since more people appear to be familiar with Stoics and I could use that as an doorway to ancient Greek philosophy. Oh, and I did actually read the ancient Greek at the end during the talk before giving the translation.

In any case, here's my recent attempt at spreading the word about Epicurus and his philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of April 2, 2020 at 11:49 AM

Thanks for posting this! I am in the middle of something else but will come back with more comments. Did you record yourself?

Post by “Cassius” of April 2, 2020 at 12:28 PM

LOL I see what you mean about maybe saying things differently now!

It looks like last October you were pretty much in a standard place where you were already sensing the contradictions between Epicurus and Stoicism without really articulating them. A true Stoic would worried about you and noted that you had a lot less to say about "virtue" than you should have from their point of view. And shockingly you seemed to be operating from the premise that the benefit of being a Stoic had something to do with the practical results of it, and that the goal of it all was to somehow be happy -- and of course that betrays your not being sold on true Stoicism!

It's also obvious that you were digging into the sources, and that's what I think has kept you here. Lots of people who find themselves in your position of last October are going to stay there if all they come into contact with is the Catherine Wilson / Time Okeefe approach. They will mind-meld Stoic and Epicurean views in one way or the other to conclude that Epicurus is focused on "simple pleasure," and that the Stoics didn't really mean what they said about virtue, and they would decide that the two are "close enough" to modern viewpoints so that the original points of the schools, and the differences between the two, can safely be ignored.

And there they stop, put the books back on the shelf, and move on to something else (unless they are paid by their college or university to write these superficial points of view for a living).

There is so much to reconsider and study about even the simplest of assertions that we take for granted, including even such a basic sentence as:

The Stoics and Epicureans, on the other hand, believed *eudaimonia* was achievable by everyone.

There are so many details of the philosophy to drill down to verify. Is the Epicurean goal properly described as "eudaimonia?" Would they have maintained that their goal, whatever the term used to describe it, was achievable by everyone?

I am not sure either of those statements apply to either the Stoics or Epicureans....

Post by "Don" of April 2, 2020 at 12:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thanks for posting this! I am in the middle of something else but will come back with more comments. Did you record yourself?

Thanks. No recording but it was well received by attendees. Several asked me personally for copies then PDF was posted to the conference site for download.

Post by “Don” of April 5, 2020 at 12:47 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Sorry it's taken so long to respond to your comments. I greatly appreciate your taking the time to read that talk (warts and all).

There's a lot I would change in this talk, but I think I'll stand by this statement, at least in principle. I'll answer with my understanding from my readings in reverse order:

1. Would they have maintained that their goal, whatever the term used to describe it, was achievable by everyone?

I would say fairly strongly, Yes. Even DeWitt uses the term evangelical to describe their philosophy. There would have been no need to evangelize if the philosophy wasn't applicable to the world. Both the Stoics and Epicureans made their philosophy available to - and attracted to their respective schools of thought - all kinds of people: citizen, slave; Greek, non-Greek; men, women (at least in the case of the Epicureans). The Garden was open to all who sought it out. The philosophy of both schools was taught, as far as I can see, as a way of life open to all. I don't think either school would say *everyone* who tried to live the Stoic or Epicurean life would do it successfully. However, the teachings themselves were made available to all who were curious and asked for instruction. The Academy and Lyceum, on the other hand, were more of exclusive clubs. The Stoic and Epicurean ways of life were achievable by all in the sense that the philosophies were taught for the good of all people and, as far as Epicurus was concerned, the goal of living a pleasurable life was achievable for those who applied his teachings steadfastly.

2. Is the Epicurean goal properly described as "eudaimonia?"

Again, I would say, Yes. Eudaimonia is simply, from my reading, another term for living joyously or pleasantly. "Happiness" is such a watered-down definition. [Wikipedia seems to do half decent job of getting at the nuance of the term.](#)

PD 20 and 21 talk about the "the life complete and perfect" (τὸ ... βίον παντελῆ) and PD 5 about the joyous/pleasant life (ἡδέως ζῆν). Eudaimonia is spoken of in similar terms in several places in Epicurus' own works.

The Letter to Menoikos talks several times specifically about eudaimonia:

Quote

Someone who says that the time to love and practice wisdom has not yet come or has passed is like someone who says that the time for **happiness** [eudaimonia] has not yet come or has passed.

ὁ δὲ λέγων ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ὥραν ἢ παρεληλυθέναι τὴν ὥραν, ὁμοίός ἐστιν τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς **εὐδαιμονίαν** ἢ μὴ παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν ἢ μηκέτι εἶναι.

Quote

Reflect on what brings happiness [eudaimonia], because if you have that you have everything, but if not you will do everything to attain it.

μελετᾶν οὖν χρὴ τὰ ποιῶντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν [happiness], εἴπερ παρούσης **μὲν** αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν, ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

Quote

Third, keep in mind that some desires are natural whereas others are groundless; that among the natural desires some are natural and necessary whereas others are merely natural; and that among the necessary desires some are necessary **for happiness [eudaimonia]**, some for physical health, and some for life itself.

ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί, καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον· τῶν δὲ ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν **πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν** εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

The Letter to Pythocles also stresses the importance of eudaimonia:

Quote

For such folly as this would not possess the most ordinary being if ever so little enlightened, much less one who enjoys **perfect felicity [eudaimonia]**.

"All this, Pythocles, you should keep in mind...

οὐδὲ γὰρ εἰς τὸ τυχὸν ζῶον, κἂν <εἰ> μικρὸν χαριέστερον εἴη, ἢ τοιαύτη μωρία ἐμπέσοι, μὴ ὅτι εἰς **παντελῆ εὐδαιμονίαν** [translated as "perfect felicity" above] κεκτημένον.

"Ταῦτα δὴ πάντα, Πυθόκλεις, μνημόνευσον:

παντελῆ is the word meaning "complete and perfect" in PD 20/21. So, here eudaimonia is getting the same modifier: complete and perfect eudaimonia.

Likewise, in VS 33, we read:

Quote

The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for **happiness [eudaimonia]**.

σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔχων τις καὶ ἐλπίζων ἔξειν [hope or expect to have] κἂν <δι> ὑπὲρ **εὐδαιμονίας** μαχέσαιτο.

Also in Fragment 548, Epicurus writes:

Quote

Happiness [eudaimon] and bliss are not produced by great riches nor vast possessions nor exalted occupations nor positions of power, but rather by peace of mind, freedom from pain, and a disposition of the soul that sets its limits in accordance with nature.

τὸ εὐδαιμον καὶ μακάριον [happiness and blessedness] οὐ χρημάτων πλῆθος οὐδὲ πραγμάτων ὄγκος οὐδ' ἀρχαί τινες ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ δυνάμεις, ἀλλ' ἀλυπία καὶ πραότης παθῶν καὶ διάθεσις ψυχῆς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὀρίζουσα.

Diogenes Laertius also uses the word eudaimonia when discussing Epicurus' philosophy in Book X:

[121] **Two sorts of happiness** [eudaimonia] can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures.

We must now proceed to his letter.

[121] **Τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν διχῆ** νοεῖσθαι, τὴν τε ἀκροτάτην, οἷα ἐστὶ περὶ τὸν θεόν, ἐπίτασιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν: καὶ τὴν <κατὰ τὴν> προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν ἡδονῶν.

Μετιτέον δ' ἐπὶ τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

And in the paragraph directly before he introduces the [Principal Doctrines](#):

Come, then, let me set the seal, so to say, on my entire work as well as on this philosopher's life by citing his *Sovran Maxims*,¹³⁸ therewith bringing the whole work to a close and making the end of it to coincide with the beginning of **happiness (eudaimonia)**.

Καὶ φέρε οὖν δὴ νῦν τὸν κολοφῶνα, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, ἐπιθῶμεν τοῦ παντὸς συγγράμματος καὶ τοῦ βίου τοῦ φιλοσόφου, τὰς Κυρίας αὐτοῦ δόξας παραθέμενοι καὶ ταύταις τὸ πᾶν σύγγραμμα κατακλείσαντες, τέλει χρῆσάμενοι τῇ τῆς **εὐδαιμονίας** ἀρχῇ.

These demonstrate to me that Epicurus saw eudaimonia as equivalent to leading a joyous, pleasant, and complete life, the goal of following the path laid out by Epicurean philosophy

Post by “Cassius” of April 5, 2020 at 6:20 AM

1 - Wow that is great work on looking for appearances of the word eudaimonia. I know Elli and I have discussed this several times and I think that she largely feels the way you do about the word.

2 - My concern, or maybe better stated as lack of commitment to emphasizing that word, stems from the first point, which is the discussion of whether everyone can reach "the goal." Yes I very much agree with you that the Epicurean "way of life" is for everyone, and is at least in some sense achievable by everyone. The reason I hesitate to describe it as "reaching the goal" is the implication that has been drummed into us that there is a single goal or a single set of achievements in life that can be met by everyone. I am of course getting into the issue of all sorts of desirable things, such as long life, many friends, large family/circle, good health, etc etc that not everyone is going to succeed in doing. I would say that poor health or many other unfortunate circumstances do not prevent them from pursuing the same goal, and from in a strong sense achieving it by living prudently in the pursuit of pleasure, but I also think it's important to stress that those who do not have the most supportive circumstances should still follow Epicurean philosophy. Perhaps this is why Jefferson's phrase "pursuit of happiness" is in fact more sound than "happiness."

I feel sure that this understanding of "pursuit" was implicit in Epicurus and that you and he and I would agree on this.

Ha now I remember this point - that I also have an aversion to using untranslated Greek words as if there is no adequate English translation. Maybe I sound like Cicero here, but I think everyone must internalize the philosophy in their own language and understanding in order to be able to apply it properly, so I don't like to talk about a goal using a word that is meaningless or confusing to most people, especially since there is such debate over what the word means.

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

Epicurus saw eudaimonia as equivalent to leading a joyous, pleasant, and complete life

So that's why when I discuss the Epicurean goal of life I like to describe it as "a joyous, pleasant, and complete life" rather than as "eudaimonia" or having a good demon, or a good spirit 😊

As usual I don't think we are very far apart at all, and I realize that my view here is just personal preference.

Post by "Don" of April 5, 2020 at 11:15 AM

😊 I agree with you that we're not very far apart at all. It sounds to me like it's a matter of emphasis. In fact, I think we agree completely on the idea of the "goal." I think the "pursuit" is the "goal." Happiness, a joyous life, eudaimonia is not really a literal goal - an end-point - but a process. The *goal* is to *lead* a pleasant life.

As to the use of the word "eudaimonia," I'm truly ambivalent.

On the one hand, I fully agree that we need to understand the philosophy in our own language. It doesn't do anybody any good to use words one doesn't understand. It would be like saying "We should pursue удовольствие" if I don't speak Russian (which I don't... I used Google Translate 😊). That is why good translations are so crucial.

On the other hand, I feel strongly that that's why we should not rely solely on translations and need to return again and again to the actual original Greek or Latin. What did Epicurus, Lucretius, Philodemus and all the others actually write? If there's a discrepancy among translations, what are they translating? Eudaimonia is one of those "untranslatable" words (not really, but bear with me) that pack a lot of meaning into one Greek word but should really be translated as a phrase or several words in English. Eudaimonia is not some cosmic, mysterious,

ethereal concept. It's a fine word and meant something concrete to ancient Greeks using it. But when it gets translated simply as "happiness" or "fulfilment" in English those words bring along their own connotations with them, obscuring what εὐδαιμονία actually meant when Epicurus decided to use it in his own works. I gladly use Sedley, DeWitt, Tsouna, Nussbaum, Bailey, and many others to inform my understanding of the original texts, but I'll always try to puzzle out from the original and work forward. Translations are sometimes barriers instead of gates.