

An Unfortunate Article Suggesting That Katastematic Pleasure is "Necessary" and Kinetic Pleasure is "Unnecessary"

Post by "Cassius" of April 14, 2021 at 11:23 AM

I haven't had time to read this article by Yosef Liebersohn, and I am not sure if or when I will, but this abstract that came across my email just reminded me for the 500th time of this issue. I'll skip over the fact that the author suggests that kinetic and katastematic are "the most dominant terms in Epicurus' theory of the pleasures (despite the fact that this comes from Cicero and Diogenes Laertius and isn't a significant factor at all in Epicurus' or Lucretius' work, as explained by Boris [Nikolsky](#)).

What's significant to me is that I have to hand it to this writer for creativity in taking the katastematic/kinetic argument that modern commentators love to discuss to what may be its logical extreme conclusion.

Once you identify "katastematic pleasure" as the ultimate goal that makes life worth living, it's easy and enticing to conclude that this "resting" or "static" type of pleasure is what is "necessary" in life, and that kinetic pleasure ("joy and delight" in Diogenes Laertius) is "unnecessary."

People who take this approach have always seemed to me to be intent on draining every last aspect of "joy and delight" out of Epicurean philosophy. Possibly this writer shows the most creative way to do that. So if you're of the persuasion to drain joy and delight out of Epicurean philosophy, by all means pursue the katastematic/kinetic distinction that leads to this form of analysis.

My own suggestion is - "**Don't!**"

"Epicurus' "Kinetic" and "Katastematic" Pleasures. A Reappraisal",
Elenchos xxxvi (2015) fasc. 2: 271-296.

Yosef E. Liebersohn

4/11/2021 2:20 PM

In this paper I shall offer new definitions for what seem to be the most dominant terms in Epicurus' theory of pleasures: "kinetic" and "katastematic". While most of the scholarly literature treats these terms as entirely concerned with states of motion and states of stability, I shall argue that the distinction concerns whether pain is or is not removed by this or that pleasure. As the removal of pain is a necessary condition for the Epicurean goal of ataraxia and apatheia, "katastematic" pleasures, having to do with the removal of pain, is the necessary pleasure pertaining both to the process of removing pain and to its result, namely the absence of pain, while "kinetic" pleasure is an unnecessary pleasure having nothing to do with the removal of pain, e.g. it exists after pain has been removed. If my analysis and interpretation prove correct, the new conventional classifications — "katastematic" and "necessary-unnecessary" — turn out to be referring to the same phenomenon and are aspects of one classification. Moreover, this new interpretation resolves some of the main problems arising from our textbooks concerning "kinetic" and "katastematic" pleasures.

Post by "Don" of April 14, 2021 at 2:46 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1949-an-unfortunate-article-suggesting-that-katastematic-pleasure-is-necessary-and-ki/>

I'm not impressed.

I started to read the paper but come across phrases like "necessary pain" and a rather free translation of the key line in the Menoikeus Letter. The author translates it as "freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind". The word freedom does not appear. The line literally reads "neither pain in the body nor trouble in the mind". It may or may not be significant, but their free interpretation leaves me unimpressed.

Post by "Cassius" of April 14, 2021 at 3:00 PM

It's hard for me to get past that first sentence. The "most dominant terms in Epicurus' theory of the pleasures"?

You can read the authentic Epicurean texts over and over again without coming across those words, and yet they are "the most dominant terms"?

Yes, they do dominate *modern* discussion, but that is because of the need for something like them to rescue the nonsense that arises when you ignore everything else that Epicurus said in order to elevate the "absence of pain" passage in the letter into a paradigm of asceticism that the Stoics would have blushed to assert.

It is amazing how much turns on how one chooses to interpret that one section of the letter to Menoecus.

Post by "Godfrey" of April 14, 2021 at 3:59 PM

"...whether pain is or is not removed by this or that pleasure..."

Just from the clip above, in addition to the issues noted, he's completely missing the point that all pleasures remove pain in the moment.

Post by "Don" of April 14, 2021 at 4:00 PM

I was going to read it and respond point by point but life's too short.

Post by “Cassius” of April 14, 2021 at 4:15 PM

Well it would probably be worth some of us doing it at some point, since this is such a recurring issue, and that's why I posted it so we could add to the "database." But I totally agree that we have a lot more important things to do.

I think maybe the most important use for something like this is to be able to cite it as an example of what this slippery slope leads to, because it takes a while before you see the end game.

A LOT of people get exposed to this paradigm as their first exposure to Epicurus:

(1) Epicurus said the goal of life is pleasure, but

(2) Epicurus redefined pleasure as absence of pain.

(3) That redefinition really doesn't make sense, so there must be some brilliant insight behind it we'd better go looking for.

(4) The brilliant insight is alleged to be that there is a really important difference between katastematic/kinetic pleasure. (And at this step it's really more effective for the proponent to leave katastematic/kinetic untranslated, rather than call it static/active, because the Greek words are much sexier, and the mystery makes the assertion much easier to swallow.)

(5) Calling the ultimate good a "resting" pleasure ("katastematic"! "ataraxia"!) sort of brings back the discussion into the realm of the intelligible, because even though these words are very ambiguous in themselves, and they contradict everyday conceptions of what pleasure is all about, "everyone knows" the major Greek philosophers were into "reason" and "thinking" and "the mind" rather than coarse and ignoble things like having fun and being active and experiencing joy and delight.

(6) So we arrive at the point intended by these proponents: Epicurus was really ahead of his time, and he was advocating asceticism, but his word-play needed to be straightened out by the Stoics, who identified that the kind of resting pleasure that we all need is the contemplation of virtue and the divine fire, in and of itself, and for no reward other than itself.

(7) And thus we see that Epicurus blends nicely into the mainstream of Greek thought, and we can put his books safely back on the shelf, content that we fully understand everything of significance Epicurus had to say.

[I hope my sarcasm or feeble attempt at humor in these steps is apparent, but just in case I'll add this note to make it clear. This analysis flies in the face of what I believe Epicurean philosophy to be all about, and it serves as a tremendous obstacle to the wider understanding and acceptance of Epicurean philosophy. I am 100% convinced that if the ancients had understood Epicurus to have been teaching this kind of analysis, Epicurean philosophy would never have seen widespread adoption, and the name of Epicurus would have been lost to history a long time ago.]