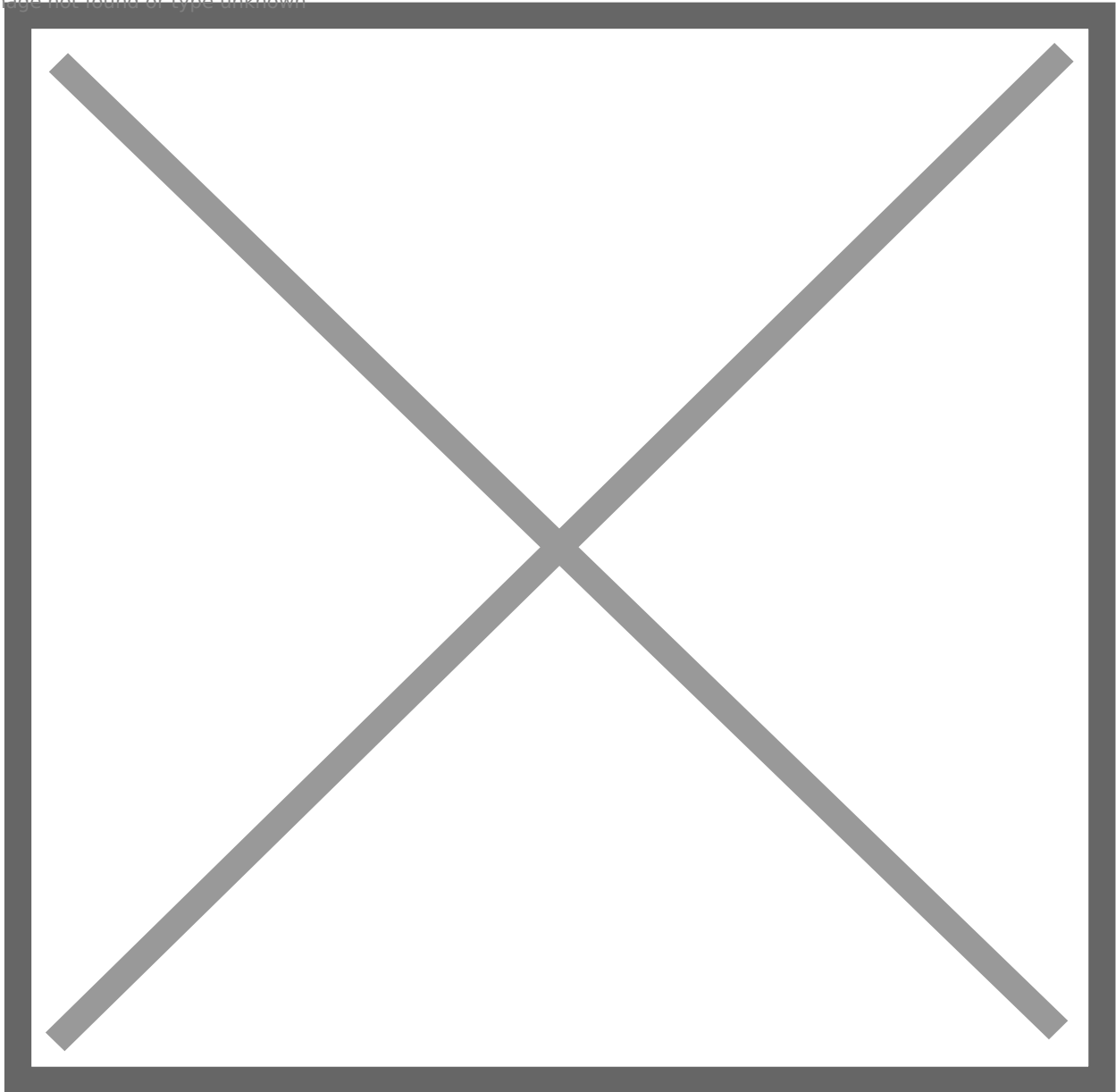


Major (In the Sense of Major Publication) Review of Emily Austin's "Living for Pleasure"

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2023 at 7:45 AM

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[Living for Pleasure by Emily A Austin - an Epicurean guide to happiness](#)

A timely guide to the Greek philosopher - and rival to the Stoics - who saw freedom from anxiety as the ultimate goal

www.theguardian.com

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

I see it doesn't take the reviewer longer than four paragraphs to give the perennial "BUT" and make the common complaint about tranquility. But the fact that he gives three positive paragraphs first is good!

Quote

Epicurus's distinctive feature is his insistence that pleasure is the source of all happiness and is the only truly good thing. Hence the modern use of "epicurean" to mean gourmand. But Epicurus was no debauched hedonist. He thought the greatest pleasure was ataraxia: a state of tranquility in which we are free from anxiety. This raises the suspicion of false advertising - freedom from anxiety may be nice, but few would say it is positively pleasurable.

The conclusion is high praise for the book, even if the writer of the article sells Epicurus short:

Quote

The clarity and concision of Austin's prose means that she covers many more of the details of Epicurean thought in her 24 short chapters. Anyone seduced by the recent fashion for Stoicism should read her book to see why their biggest contemporary rival offers a better model for living. The Stoics tell us that the only thing that matters is virtue, we should be indifferent when loved ones die, and that the universe works providentially, so ultimately nothing in it is bad. Epicurus was realistic enough to accept that external circumstances can make life intolerable, grief is natural and real, and shit happens. He speaks to us all, but does not offer a universal prescription for the great life. Freedom from anxiety is good, all other things being equal, but many would say that a willingness to do without tranquility is what has enabled them to push themselves and live fuller lives. Austin ultimately shows that Epicurus is a pretty good guide on the journey of life, but you should let some other thinkers show you around too.

Seems to me that the Guardian has lots of readers so it is great to see this review! And generally I think the article is as positive as we have the right to expect given current attitudes.

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2023 at 8:01 AM

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

"Epicurus .I. does not offer a universal prescription for the great life. Freedom from anxiety is good, all other things being equal, but many would say that a willingness to do without tranquility is what has enabled them to push themselves and live fuller lives.'

That's a pretty good summary of the common dismissal of Epicurus, but I am confident we can deal with those complaints, and that should be a large part of our ongoing projects here at the forum.

We'll have to explain how a "universal prescription" doesn't mean quite what he thinks it does, but even more clearly we have to continue to work to deal with the 'tranquility is what he is pushing" and "freedom from anxiety is all that matters" issues.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 8:11 AM



A generally positive review in The Guardian is no small feat!! Congratulations to Dr. Austin!

I can easily imagine the Stoics huffing and puffing and "Oh, they just don't understand Stoicism!!" Methinks we understand y'all better than you think. 😊

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 8:39 AM

Quote from The Guardian

Freedom from anxiety is good, all other things being equal, but many would say that a willingness to do without tranquility is what has enabled them to push themselves and live fuller lives.

(clears throat...)

Quote from Epicurus

For we recognize it as the primary and innate good, we honor it in everything we accept or reject, and we achieve it if we judge every good thing by the standard of how

that thing affects us. And because this is the primary and inborn good, we do not choose every pleasure. Instead, we pass up many pleasures when we will gain more of what we need from doing so. And we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, if we experience a greater pleasure for a long time from having endured those pains. So every pleasure is a good thing because its nature is favorable to us, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen — just as every pain is a bad thing, yet not every pain is always to be shunned. It is proper to make all these decisions through measuring things side by side and looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, for sometimes we treat a good thing as bad and a bad thing as good.

Just sayin', Guardian. Epicurus has you covered.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 10:26 AM

I want to say explicitly that, from my perspective, Emily (Dr. Austin preferred Emily on our podcast conversation, so I feel I can use her first name 😊) did an *exceptional* job of placing tranquility and freedom from anxiety in context while maintaining its importance in Epicurean philosophy. I completely agree with her characterization. And just to make sure I understood her characterization, my take is that Epicurus taught that ataraxia was vitally important for the both the pleasure that a calm, anxiety-free mind brings itself BUT ALSO that it allows the enjoyment of other pleasures - both necessary and extravagant - in our lives more fully. With tranquil minds, we are more fully present to the everyday pleasures we experience, like a wholesome lunch of warm fresh bread and cool water... Just as an example 😊

Post by “Todd” of January 26, 2023 at 11:14 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus taught that ataraxia was vitally important for the both the pleasure that a calm, anxiety-free mind brings itself BUT ALSO that it allows the enjoyment of other pleasures - both necessary and extravagant - in our lives more fully.

AND ALSO ataraxia helps us prudently prepare for or react to painful circumstances, rather than allowing fear or anger to dictate our actions.

There is basically no situation in which anxiety is more useful than a calm presence of mind.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 26, 2023 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

There is basically no situation in which anxiety is more useful than a calm presence of mind.

An excerpt from a New York Times article has this to say:

"Having some anxiety — especially when faced with a stressful situation — isn't necessarily bad and can actually be helpful, experts say."

The article goes on to say:

"The right amount of anxiety can improve performance."

"Anxiety is an uncomfortable emotion, often fueled by uncertainty. It can create intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear, not just about stressful events but also about everyday situations. There are usually physical symptoms too, like fast heart rate, muscle tension, rapid breathing, sweating and fatigue.

Too much anxiety can be debilitating. But a normal amount is meant to help keep us safe, experts say.

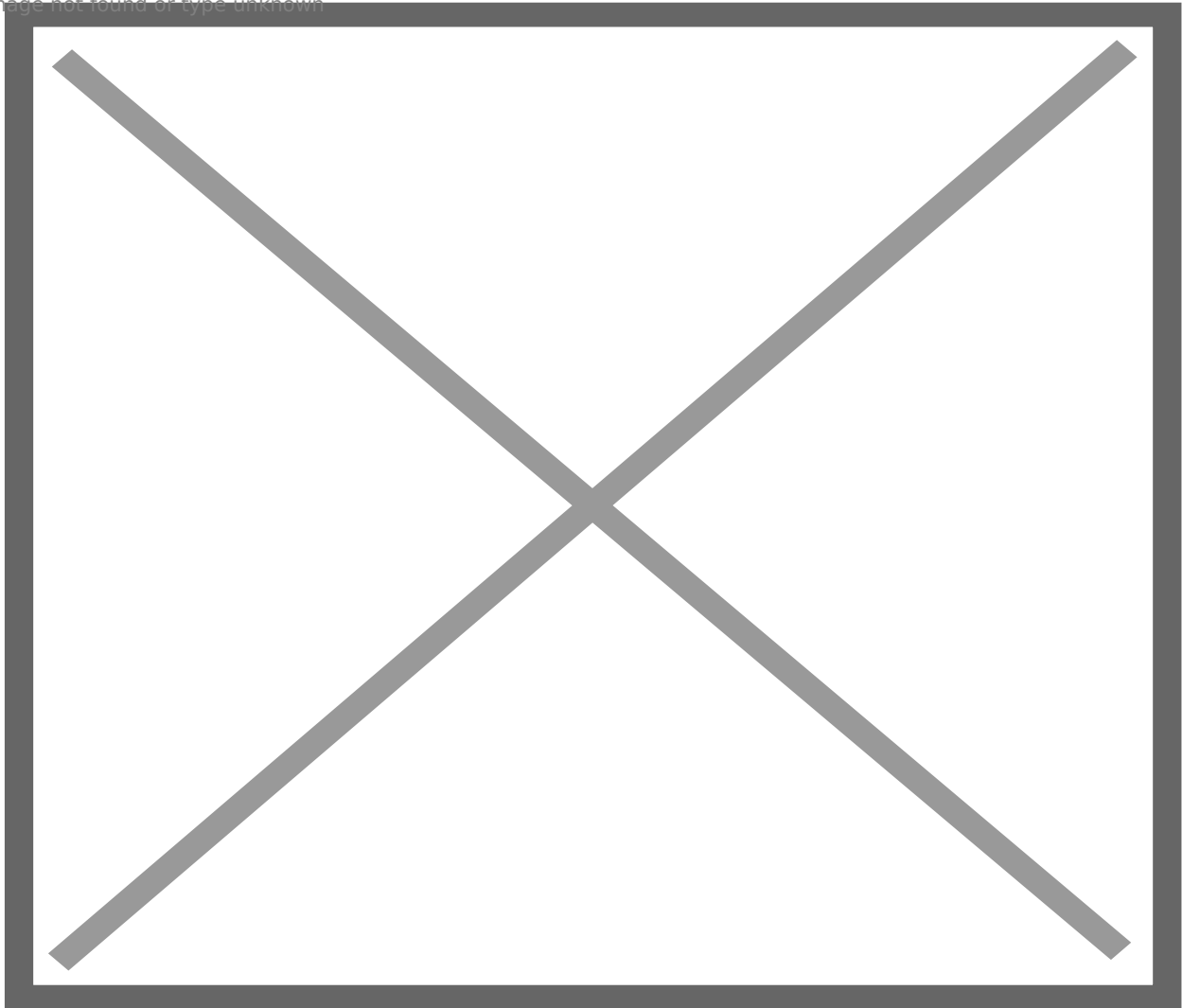
"The emotion of anxiety and the underlying physiological stress response evolved to protect us," Wendy Suzuki, a neuroscientist and the author of "Good Anxiety," said."

And this:

"A certain degree of anxiety can help people anticipate obstacles, remain cautious and stay organized, said Ellen Hendriksen, a clinical psychologist in Boston and the author of "How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety."

Read the full article here:

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[The Upside of Anxiety \(Published 2022\)](#)

There are several benefits to having an internal alarm system, experts say.
www.nytimes.com

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2023 at 11:32 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

There is basically no situation in which anxiety is more useful than a calm presence of mind.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

I agree with that but I am not sure something does not need clarifying. "Anxiety" seems to be used by some people to cover a very wide range of things, including "anger."

I think we can say confidently that there are times when "anger," at least of a type, is indeed appropriate in response to certain circumstances. We've had a recent thread I think with some material from Philodemus on that.

So if "anxiety" means fuzzy operation of the brain or something like that then yes that would "always" be something to avoid. But if the situation demands "anger" then that can sometimes be exactly what the doctor ordered.

Seems like we had something more recent than this, but here's one. Maybe life is just moving too fast for me to judge "recent" very well:

[Epicurean Views On How To Integrate "Anger" Into A Healthy Life](#)

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2023 at 11:33 AM

I see Kalosyni has crossposted pretty much the same perspective as what I just posted on "anger." Hers is probably even more widely applicable than my comment.

I updated my earlier thread with this clip of the book cover:



Post by "Todd" of January 26, 2023 at 12:41 PM

I couldn't read the article - it seems to be behind a paywall. But here are my initial thoughts.

My gut reaction: Fear/anxiety is an extremely powerful emotion, and is a very effective tool for manipulating people. If I see someone telling me it's good to feel anxiety, I'm immediately

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

suspicious.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I agree with that but I am not sure something does not need clarifying. "Anxiety" seems to be used by some people to cover a very wide range of things, including "anger."

I would not consider anger a form of anxiety. If you want a definition, I'd say anxiety is fear about the future. It suggests chronic fear about the more distant and uncertain future, but since all fear is ultimately about the future, that seems like merely a matter of degree.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think we can say confidently that there are times when "anger," at least of a type, is indeed appropriate in response to certain circumstances. We've had a recent thread I think with some material from Philodemus on that.

I agree, but I think some clarification is needed. Anger (or sadness, or even fear) can certainly be an appropriate feeling in a given situation. Those are non-rational reactions - we can't choose to feel or not feel them. My point is that actions based solely on those emotions are unlikely to maximize our future pleasure. We need to choose our actions prudently, and consider what will be the result if I do this thing, and what if I do not. Actions are most effective when chosen rationally, and a state of ataraxia is best for doing that.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"The emotion of anxiety and the underlying physiological stress response evolved to protect us," Wendy Suzuki, a neuroscientist and the author of "Good Anxiety," said."

True, but I feel like this is leaving out some important context.

Fear and the associated stress response evolved in animals prior to humans, and prior to the development of the pre-frontal cortex.

When animals experience fear, they are reacting to an immediate, present danger. Animals can't imagine hypothetical future states to worry about. Humans can, and do.

Animals don't imagine what other animals might be thinking about them, and worry about that. Humans can, and do.

Animals (including humans) evolved to default to fear when encountering something new. This makes sense for self-preservation in a largely hostile environment. It doesn't work as well in the mostly safe environment that humans have been able to create for ourselves.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 12:42 PM

I read that New York Times article and what kept running through my head was...

Quote from Inigo Montoya

You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.

It seems to me they're using "anxiety" to mean several different things because the word attracts attention. "Anxiety is good" is better than a nuanced approach to the research and findings. I certainly wouldn't use "anxiety" to describe the several different emotions they're discussing.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 26, 2023 at 12:56 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It seems to me they're using "anxiety" to mean several different things because the word attracts attention.

It looks like it is very important to define the words we use, otherwise it all gets very muddy.

Maybe for our purposes here in what we understand as Epicurean teachings, instead of anxiety we could use the word "worry"?

But then I wonder, should everyone try to live a worry-free life? Is it even possible? Would a worry-free life be worth living? What would you have to sacrifice to live completely worry-free?

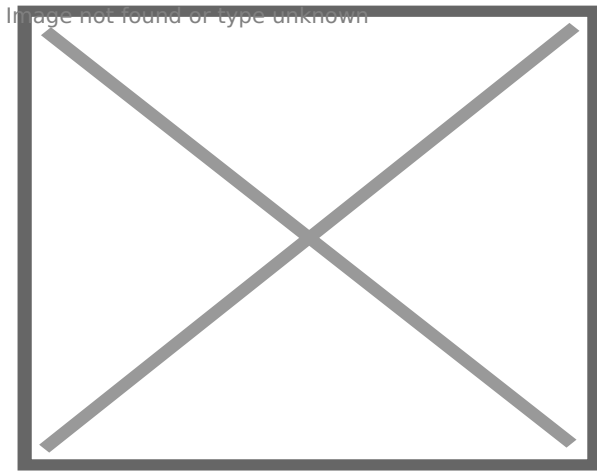
Should questions like these remain a personal exploration, so there is no right or wrong or absolute answer that applies to everyone or to every time and place? Or is this a helpful line of discussion amongst friends? (Or is it making things more confusing than they need to be?)

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 1:25 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

instead of anxiety we could use the word "worry"?

I'm coming around to the word "rumination."



[Rumination: Relationships with Physical Health](#)

Rumination is a form of perseverative cognition that focuses on negative content, generally past and present, and results in emotional distress. Initial...

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Although "worry" could work for future directed anxiety.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

should everyone try to live a worry-free life? Is it even possible? Would a worry-free life be worth living?

Yes to all, in my opinion. It comes down to whether one can take action or not. It seems similar to the sentiment encapsulated in that Serenity Prayer. Basically, if something can be done about a situation, do it. If nothing can be done, don't worry about it. Make prudent decisions about both.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Should questions like these remain a personal exploration, so there is no right or wrong or absolute answer that applies to everyone or to every time and place? Or is this a help line of discussion amongst friends?

It seems to me that Epicurus was fairly clear and firm that ataraxia was a necessary component of a pleasurable life. It's not morally right or wrong, it's a way of experiencing our lives, clear-eyed, worry-free, and taking prudent action in all situations that will lead to the most

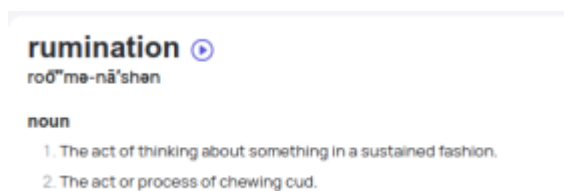
<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

pleasurable life possible for ourselves.

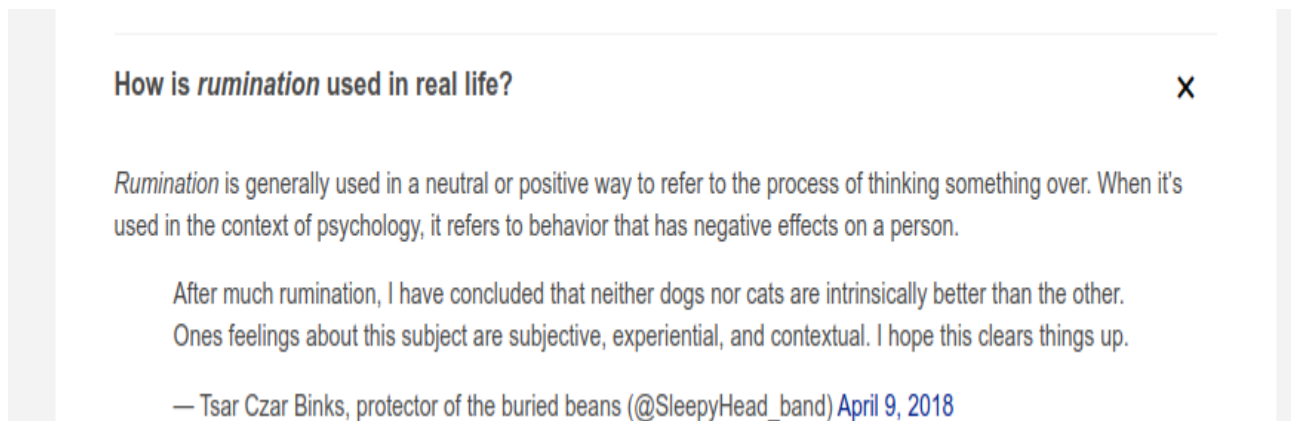
PS: And I speak as a "recovering ruminator" myself!

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2023 at 1:54 PM

What? "Rumination" is not generally a negative word, is it?



I guess this is why have an instinctive distrust for "psychology." Why take a perfectly fine word and twist it to pieces?! 😊



Wow this reminds me of other perfectly fine words -- "tranquility," "calmness," even "ataraxia" or "katastematic" - which are perfectly fine when used by normal people in normal ways, but perfectly pernicious when taken out of context and defined as "*the great end of all things to which all else aims!*" 😊

Time for another shouting session, and to substitute in the place of "virtue" those other words I just mentioned:

But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues,

which are inopportune messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 2:17 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What? "Rumination" is not generally a negative word, is it?

LOL. I've never had a positive connotation associated with ruminate 😄

To me, it's chewing over something in your mind over and over without getting anywhere.

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2023 at 2:19 PM

There's only one person who can settle this: We will have to consult [Joshua](#) on how the word is used in poetry! 😊

Post by “Todd” of January 26, 2023 at 2:24 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Maybe for our purposes here in what we understand as Epicurean teachings, instead of anxiety we could use the word "worry"?

I think of worry and anxiety as basically synonyms. Anxiety is more precise, clinical; worry is more natural, vernacular. But I think they refer to the same mental state.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

But then I wonder, should everyone try to live a worry-free life? Is it even possible? Would a worry-free life be worth living? What would you have to sacrifice to live completely worry-free?

This is exactly why we pursue **pleasure**, not ataraxia!

Should everyone try to live a worry-free life? All else being equal, of course; but everything else is never equal. Everyone should try to live a life with as much pleasure as possible. But no one can expect to live a life completely free of pain (or worry/anxiety). Sometimes we will make choices that we expect to lead to more worry or anxiety, but we do so for the sake of an even greater pleasure. (I'm thinking particularly about having children here.)

Post by “Todd” of January 26, 2023 at 2:29 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What? "Rumination" is not generally a negative word, is it?

LOL. I've never had a positive connotation associated with ruminate 😊

To me, it's chewing over something in your mind over and over without getting anywhere.

I'm with [Cassius](#) on this one.

Ruminate was always more or less neutral to me. I could certainly imagine myself relaxing by a gentle stream, ruminating about some ideas I'd recently encountered.

It has only been in the last few months/years that I've seen it used in this kind of clinical way to refer to negative thoughts. Maybe it has always been used that way...just saying I was not aware of it until relatively recently.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 2:31 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

I could certainly imagine myself relaxing by a gentle stream, ruminating about some ideas I'd recently encountered

See, now I'd call that contemplating or cogitating. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2023 at 2:45 PM

I suspect that Don may bear some secret grudge against cows or goats. :-). Due to associating the word with "chewing the cud" I have also generally considered it not the most flattering way to describe applied thinking. I can think of a lot better examples than cows to go by and pick a word. But at worst I've connected it with "idle" or "slowly picking through" something and I have never seen it used in such a negative way as those psychologists have decided to do.

I would suspect if Joshua comes up with any Shakespearean or similar examples, they won't be nearly so negative as this clinical use.

I too would generally look first to "cogitate" or the like.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 4:24 PM

I'm thinking it might be more advantages to *describe* the condition we want to be free of rather than use a single word (since that's my modus operandi when I translate from ancient Greek 😊). By "free from anxiety" I mean...

Free from incessant, nagging doubt or worry of whether past actions were the right ones to take, whether present circumstances are the right course to take, and whether the future is to be dreaded.

That's just a first draft for conversation!

Post by “Charles” of January 26, 2023 at 4:39 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What? "Rumination" is not generally a negative word, is it?

Like Todd, I always took it to be neutral. At best it's the meandering stream of conscious, with some merit. At worst it's delusion. I find it useful to rethink familiar paths and conclusions in an almost scholastic manner.

Post by “Joshua” of January 26, 2023 at 5:26 PM

Quote from Cassius

There's only one person who can settle this: We will have to consult [Joshua](#) on how the word is used in poetry! 😊

I can't think of a poem off the top of my head; what 'rumination' instantly puts me in mind of is this passage by Bill Bryson from his book *In a Sunburnt Country* (one of the world's great audiobooks!):

(The length of the passage is very much part of the point)

"Eventually the radio dial presented only an uninterrupted cat's hiss of static but for one clear spot near the end of the dial. At first I thought that's all it was — just an empty clear spot — but then I realized I could hear the faint shiftings and stirrings of seated people, and after quite a pause, a voice, calm and reflective, said:

"Pilchard begins his long run in from short stump. He bowls and . . . oh, he's out! Yes, he's got him. Longwilley is caught legbefore in middle slops by Grattan. Well, now what do you make of that, Neville?"

"That's definitely one for the books, Bruce. I don't think I've seen offside medium-slow fast-pace bowling to match it since Badel-Powell took Rangachangabanga for a maiden ovary at Bangalore in 1948."

I had stumbled into the surreal and rewarding world of cricket on the radio.

[...] it must be said there is something incomparably soothing about cricket on the radio. It has much the same virtues as baseball on the radio — an unhurried pace, a comforting devotion to

abstruse statistics and thoughtful historical rumination, exhilarating micro-moments of real action – but stretched across many more hours and with a lushness of terminology and restful elegance of expression that even baseball cannot match. Listening to cricket on the radio is like listening to two men sitting in a rowing boat on a large, placid lake on a day when the fish aren't biting: it's like having a nap without losing consciousness. It actually helps not to know quite what's going on. In such a rarefied world of contentment and inactivity, comprehension would become a distraction.

'So here comes Stovepipe to bowl on this glorious summer's afternoon at the MCG,' one of the commentators was saying now. 'I wonder if he'll chance an offside drop score here or go for the quick legover. Stovepipe has an unusual delivery in that he actually leaves the grounds and starts his run just outside the Carlton & United Brewery at Kooyong.'

'That's right, Clive. I haven't known anyone start his delivery that far back since Stopcock caught his sleeve on the reversing mirror of a number 11 bus during the third test at Brisbane in 1957 and ended up at Goondiwindi four days later owing to some frightful confusion over a changed timetable at Toowoomba Junction.'

After a very long silence while they absorbed this thought, and possibly stepped out to transact some small errands, they resumed with a leisurely discussion of the England fielding. Neasden, it appeared, was turning in a solid performance at square bowler, while Packet had been a stalwart in the dribbles, though even these exemplary performances paled when set beside the outstanding play of young Hugh Twain-Buttocks at middle nipple. The commentators were in calm agreement that they had not seen anyone caught behind with such panache since Tandoori took Rogan Josh for a stiff at Vindaloo in '61. At last, Stovepipe, having found his way over the railway line at Flinders Street – the footbridge was evidently closed for painting – returned to the stadium and bowled to Hasty, who deftly turned the ball away for a corner. This was repeated four times more over the next two hours and then one of the commentators pronounced: 'So as we break for second luncheon, and with 11,200 balls remaining, Australia are 962 for two not half and England are four for a duck and hoping for rain.'

I may not have all the terminology exactly right, but that I believe I have caught the flavour of it."

Post by “Todd” of January 26, 2023 at 5:34 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'm thinking it might be more advantages to *describe* the condition we want to be free of rather than use a single word (since that's my modus operandi when I translate from ancient Greek 😊). By "free from anxiety" I mean...

Free from incessant, nagging doubt or worry of whether past actions were the right ones to take, whether present circumstances are the right course to take, and whether the future is to be dreaded.

That's just a first draft for conversation!

The condition I've been focusing on is, I think, accurately described by "anxiety" or "worry". But if you want a more verbose description, I would call it "fears about the future that are not connected to any immediate threat"

I'm not saying that is the ONLY condition we need to avoid. I was specifically focusing on anxiety because that was the term Austin and others in this thread were using.

Rather than focusing on what we want to avoid, though, it is probably more useful to focus on the pleasant mental state we want to cultivate.

Post by “kochiekoch” of January 27, 2023 at 7:27 AM

Dang! You beat me to it. LOL!!! I thought I had a new article to post! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2023 at 8:11 AM

[Quote from kochiekoch](#)

Dang! You beat me to it. LOL!!! I thought I had a new article to post!

Thanks for checking and backing us up!

Post by “Marco” of March 12, 2023 at 4:24 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2853-major-in-the-sense-of-major-publication-review-of-emily-austin-s-living-for-plea/>

I am working on a summary of E. Austin's book in Dutch. Those interested can read it, or make additions before I upload it.