

Epicurean gods and Aristotelian contemplation

Post by “Godfrey” of September 2, 2023 at 10:56 PM

There's a paper on Academia titled 'Aristotle and the Uses of Contemplation' (M.D. Walker, CUP 2018), by Tom Angier. It's a review of Walker's book of that title. It mentioned something new to me (me being basically ignorant about Aristotle), which is that Aristotle's highest good of contemplation was theological.

Although not mentioned, this got me thinking that Epicurus' insistence that the gods are real likely was some kind of response to Aristotle. Since Aristotle placed (theological?) contemplation quite highly, Epicurus was making a point about the importance of contemplating the true nature of the gods and of the importance of pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2023 at 6:35 AM

I see a summary introduction here: <https://philarchive.org/archive/WALAOT-11>

For Aristotle, philosophical contemplation, or theôria, is, in some sense, the ultimate end for human beings. Contemplation is that for the sake of which our rational actions aim. The power to contemplate also has a special position in the human soul – for Aristotle, an integrated system of life-functions. Contemplation is the authoritative, or dominant, function for the sake of which the human soul's subordinate functions (e.g., nutrition, perception, and practical reasoning) exist. As the telos of our rational actions and of our other life-functions, contemplation is, for Aristotle, the main organizing principle in our kind-specific good as human beings.

On standard readings of Aristotle, contemplation has another, striking feature: it is thoroughly useless. Choiceworthy for its own sake, and lacking subservience to any higher functions, contemplation is free and leisured. Its proper objects eternal and divine, contemplation does not concern itself with pressing issues in the contingent realm of human affairs. Unlike other life-functions, it seems, contemplation makes no contribution to human self-maintenance.¹

Standard readings of Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's uselessness are partly correct. On Aristotle's account, contemplation's objects are eternal and divine. Contemplation is not directly concerned with practical affairs. Nor does contemplation subserve any functions higher than itself. No higher functions exist in the human soul, after all, for contemplation usefully to

subserve. So, Aristotle provides good reason to think that contemplation is, somehow, a useless activity.

ENDING WITH:

In sum: even if contemplation has the divine objects Aristotle explicitly insists it does, contemplation still has a role in meeting basic vital human needs. Even if contemplation is useless in a certain sense, contemplation can still be useful in the way that Aristotle's broader views suggest it should be. Ultimately, I contend, Aristotle's account of the human good is fully at home in Aristotle's larger vision of the world.

Post by "Don" of September 3, 2023 at 6:37 AM

Great find!

All these people seem to have been commenting and reacting to each other, and your find there seems to support that idea.

Post by "Don" of September 3, 2023 at 7:06 AM

[Epicurean Sage - ...enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation](#)

Hicks: He will take more delight than other men in state festivals. Yonge: ...and he will find more pleasure than other men in speculations. Yonge appears to...
sites.google.com

My take on θεωρία (theōria)

Post by "Cassius" of September 3, 2023 at 8:56 AM

Don do you know of or do you have anywhere a "syllabus" of key Greek words that we are constantly referring to?

It seems like it might be a good a idea to have a list in a single place of these key words in alphabetical order so we can refer to them extremely quickly, and perhaps put a list in a sidebar or a special page.

In fact a three-column format of Greek / Latin / Closest English equivalents would be even better.

I bet such a thing already exists somewhere that we might take and adapt.

Post by “Don” of September 3, 2023 at 9:08 AM

I would be very reluctant to endorse a simple one-to-one glossary of Greek/Latin/English terms. See my recent post on the notes from Dr. Gordon's book regarding ἡδονή/voluptas/pleasure. Maybe a list connecting to entries in the LSJ or Latin equivalent, but not a simple word list.

PS. There's also the change that context can provide to certain words. Look at θεωρία itself:

1. sending of state-ambassadors (θεωροί)
 2. embassy, mission
 3. sight, spectacle, viewing
 4. consideration, theory, speculation
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Post by “Cassius” of September 3, 2023 at 9:19 AM

I think if I elect to have a tombstone instead of being cremated I am going to have to have it inscribed:

"Don't Let The Perfect Be The Enemy Of The Good"



I am sure there must be many such lists out there, like [this](#) one, but I want one also that has the Greek lettering to make it easier to fix up OCR scans, which seem to struggle with Greek. I am running into that now with the Cicero "On Ends" scanning. Such a list can't be a dictionary

with full definitions, but can serve as a starting point for new readers and uses like I am describing where the Greek version is used and new readers find it hard to decipher.

Post by “Don” of September 3, 2023 at 9:47 AM

LOL. You do fly that flag often, and usually for good reason.

It sounds like you're asking for two things. One an easy way to copy paste Greek into scanned docs with bad OCR. The other a glossary.

I have no problem with the first, however that comes about.

The latter is the one I have problems with. Lists like that can provide a false sense of security. Even when a Greek word has an "obvious" English translation, nuance is still at play. Especially when it comes to philosophical discourse. It may not be a big deal to determine the exact shade of green meant by πράσινος unless you're an art historian or museum restorer, but even there, context is everything. The idea that there's an easy one to one correspondence between languages is specious.

Now, of course, we can read translations! We'd be the poorer for it. Of course, people speaking different languages can communicate.

But simply accepting that ηδονή means voluptas means pleasure gives one an assurance that one understands the meaning of a text when there's more going on than a surface meaning.

PS. I'd offer a permutation on your adage:

"Don't let the 'good enough' masquerade as the good."

Acceptance of good enough equivalencies are sometimes indeed good enough. Other times, good enough equivalencies paper over real complexities in meaning.