

My 2024 Resolution: Get A More Accurate Picture of Epicurean Pleasure To The World Rather Than "Tranquility" or "Live Unkown"(Comment on Irish Times Article)

Post by "Cassius" of January 1, 2024 at 7:03 AM

Here's a part of a new article from today in the "Irish Times". It's not terrible, and it contains some good material, but it spins "live unknown" (which as we've seen from [our interview with Dr. Boeri](#) is poorly documented and probably not a key Epicurean advice) as if it is the key to happiness, and once again emphasizes "tranquility" rather than Epicurus' wider view of pleasure:

[Here's the secret to happiness in 2024, according to a dead Greek philosopher: don't get noticed](#)

New Year's resolutions can be hard work. Join a gym? Change jobs? Travel the world? It is exhausting just thinking of the options.

To make matters simpler for you, here's a bit of advice from the Greek philosopher Epicurus: "Live Unnoticed."

It's a rule not just for 2024 but for life, according to academic philosopher Alex Moran. "The point of the slogan is to guide us towards living a tranquil and peaceful life."

Currently based at the Université de Fribourg in Switzerland, Moran was formerly an Irish Research Council research fellow at Trinity College Dublin and is moving to Princeton in the United States next year in a whirlwind tour of scholarliness that sounds anything but tranquil. However, Moran stresses that to "Live Unnoticed" is not necessarily to quit your career or to let yourself go. Rather, it's about letting go of the wrong sort of desires. "I think that Epicurus would say that the point of the dictum is not to rule out all activities that might get you noticed, but rather to insist that we need to avoid doing things for the wrong reasons."

Moran, who hails from Southport in England and is an Irish citizen with some Co Offaly roots in his family, explains further as this week's Unthinkable guest.

What did Epicurus mean by 'Live unnoticed'?

“To live quietly or unnoticed, for Epicurus, is to live in peace, to live in tranquillity – and this for Epicurus is the only way to live a happy life. But to live tranquilly, in peace, one has to eschew certain things – certain ‘loud’ ways of living that involve chasing after power, fame and status, seeking to make a name for oneself, striving for riches well beyond what one actually needs, engaging in pointless conflicts, making sure one is well-regarded by all, and various other things of that nature.”

How did the motto fit into his wider philosophical outlook?

“Epicurus was a hedonist, who thought that pleasure is the only good. It is this commitment that often leads people to wrongly think of Epicurus as a kind of glutton, who thought that lavish dinners with expensive wines might somehow constitute the key to happiness. In fact, Epicurus thinks the only genuine pleasures are those he calls the ‘tranquil pleasures’.

“There are ways to object to this. Nietzsche, for example, famously wished upon his friends ‘suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities’, since, he thought, it is only through enduring suffering that one could say one’s life had any value. But that’s a radical idea, and many of us will agree with Epicurus that a tranquil, peaceful life is a good one.”

Alex Moran: 'Many of us will agree with Epicurus that a tranquil, peaceful life is a good one' Some might see it as a shrunken or inferior existence. Why not live loudly since you’ve only one life?

“It’s a good question. To return again to Nietzsche, another of his famous claims is that one ought to live dangerously. A valuable and worthy life, he thinks, not only involves overcoming suffering, but also taking risks and meeting difficult challenges. But this is perhaps a far cry from striving to live quietly or unnoticed.

“There might be room for reconciling these outlooks. A more combative Epicurean response here, however, would be to insist – and not at all unreasonably – that since the good life is a life of pleasure and happiness, and since pleasure and happiness require tranquillity, Nietzsche is simply on the wrong track. Here it is useful to reflect on what kind of life one would wish for oneself: a life full of suffering and difficulty, or a life full of the enjoyment of tranquil pleasure?

“Epicurus agreed that we live only once, viewing belief in the afterlife as a dangerous myth. However, I think Epicurus would say that, especially because there is no afterlife, it is important that we spend our limited time on Earth wisely.”

What would Epicurus say about modern society?

“The question points to an important lesson we can learn from Epicurus. In our consumerist age, we tend to be very image- and status-obsessed. We buy things to make ourselves look good. We post on social media for the same reason. We care about our image and we can’t be happy unless the world thinks well of us. I think all this serves only to increase misery and

stress.

“We’d all be mentally much healthier if, in Epicurean fashion, we cared a lot less about image and status. Instead, we should focus on our friends and families, and on activities that constitute sources of tranquil pleasure and which are valuable in and of themselves.”

Is political activism compatible with living unnoticed?

“One of Epicurus’s main philosophical opponents, the Roman orator Cicero, criticised Epicureanism precisely on the grounds that it encourages a problematic political quietism. But Epicurus was not against all forms of political involvement. He placed a great deal of value on friendship, and thought that building a community of like-minded people was essential to living well.

“For Epicurus, what we should be avoiding are the corrosive desires for power, fame, wealth and status, which produce anxiety and undermine tranquillity. It doesn’t follow that we must avoid all those activities that might lead to recognition, whether it be political activism, the production of great art or becoming excellent at sport. What matters is that we do things for the right reasons, so as to preserve tranquillity and peace.”

Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 1, 2024 at 8:45 AM

What happens if you interpret "Live Unnoticed" within the framework of life experience of Epicurus? Is it to live like the wild flower of the meadow that strives to grow gracefully, a source of pollen for a visiting bee? Is it to live like a tree of the forest that gathers sun, gives shade to its neighbors, and nurtures a place for growth? Is it to live like the quiet craftsman who builds a home for a family? We can imagine many ways where being unnoticed was quiet strength. Could he have meant that?

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2024 at 10:55 AM

Fwiw, here's a thread started in 2020 on this topic...

Thread

[What "Live Unknown" means to me \(Lathe Biosas\)](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3619-my-2024-resolution-get-a-more-accurate-picture-of-epicurean-pleasure-to-the-world/)

Fragment 551 famously reads λάθε βιώσας and is usually translated as "Live unknown." It could also be translated as "Live hidden," "Live unnoticed," or "Live while escaping notice."

But how do we square this coming from Epicurus who is known two thousand years after he died. Did he live by this maxim? We can't say Epicurus was even unknown during his life. So how are we to understand λάθε βιώσας as it pertains to him and ourselves?

Epicurus encouraged people to shun the world of politics and the...



Don

March 7, 2020 at 11:12 PM

Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 1, 2024 at 11:28 AM

Thanks Don. So then we struggle with why that "should" be a goal. How is that beneficial to the journey of the individual, the society, the species, or the planet?

Or, is that covert language for the separation that characterizes depression? Is it withdrawal?

Thoughts?

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2024 at 11:51 AM

I don't think "lathē biosas" is a goal. I would characterize it as a strategy... Or is it a tactic? I get those two confused. It seems to me to be more of a skillful means to navigate the vicissitudes of the opinions of the hoi polloi and to assess what is important and what is not in living a pleasurable life.

The phrase is misunderstood and mistranslated as some kind of call to being a hermit or recluse, and I vehemently disagree with that.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 1, 2024 at 12:28 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3619-my-2024-resolution-get-a-more-accurate-picture-of-epicurean-pleasure-to-the-wor/>

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

What happens if you interpret "Live Unnoticed" within the framework of life experience of Epicurus? Is it to live like the wild flower of the meadow that strives to grow gracefully, a source of pollen for a visiting bee? Is it to live like a tree of the forest that gathers sun, gives shade to its neighbors, and nurtures a place for growth? Is it to live like the quiet craftsman who builds a home for a family? We can imagine many ways where being unnoticed was quiet strength. Could he have meant that?

One story about Epicurus that contextualizes his warnings against participating in government is tempered by his treatment of Mithres. After the move to Lampsacus, Epicurus befriended (*correct me if any of these details are inaccurate, this is a ball-park reflection and I might be missing up some of my facts, but...*) a man named Mithres, who served on a royal court in modern-day Turkey. Fast-forward to Epicurus' Garden in Athens. Mithres becomes relegated to a political refugee. Notes are exchanged, and Mithres is set to flee to Athens and seek asylum in the Garden. However, as soon as he arrived, he was arrested as a fugitive. Epicurus discovers this, and immediately sends Metrodorus to the jail to post his bail. Mithres briefly lives in the the garden, until he could preserve an independent life for himself without fear of being re-arrested as a fugitive of a State.

I think that recommendation to *lathē biosas* is occasionally misinterpreted as being a complete withdrawal from all forms of human society so completely that they are unwilling to take a stand when an existential threat arises due to politics. Contrary to that, Epicurus invited slaves to learn in his Garden, he went out of his way to personally pay for the freedom of political refugees, and he offered amnesty to international fugitives. When moving to Lampsacus, he immediately tried to befriend members of government to ease scrutiny on his tradition, and it worked. I think *lathē biosas* might be better seen to us in the modern era as something like ... " *keep your head low and your mouth shut*", which follows Epicurus' proposition that the Sage *may* occasionally break the law, but only if doing so improves their circumstances and they cannot be convicted.

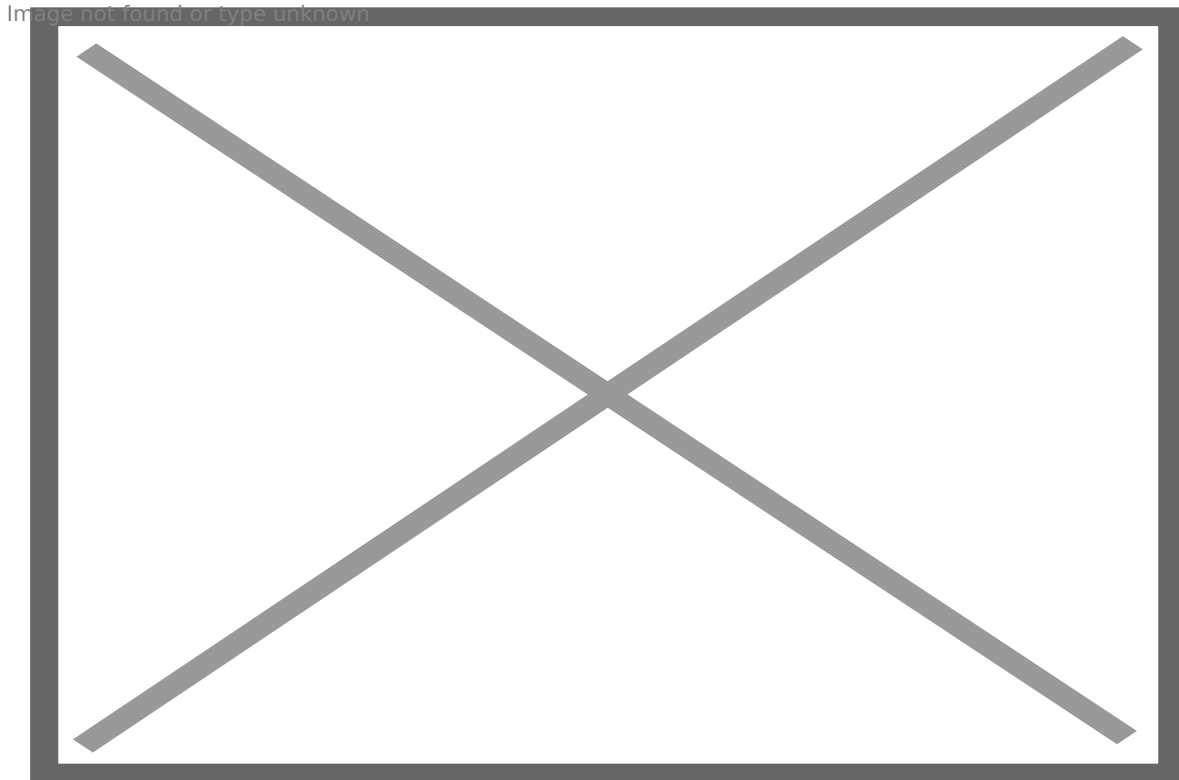
To wrap this back around to the main topic, one-way-or-the-other, *lathē biosas* is a good, and, in particular, an instrumental good, but not, itself, the goal, which is resolutely **pleasure**.

Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 1, 2024 at 3:16 PM

Excellent thoughts, Don and Nate. Thank you. Nate: the "keep your head low and mouth shut" perspective is particularly helpful as a succinct translation. 😊👍

Post by “Pacatus” of January 1, 2024 at 3:29 PM

[BrainToBeing](#) I was just re-reading this older post by Elayne (who is an MD, PhD) and thought you might find it interesting. Just a thought ... 😊



[On Pain, Pleasure, and Happiness - Epicureanfriends.com](#)

Not "absence of pain" as a full statement of the goal of life, but “the Feelings are two, pleasure and pain” and “Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a...

www.epicureanfriends.com

BTW: Happy New Year!

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2024 at 5:01 PM

I have edited the title of the thread to make it more clear that "Live Unknown" falls under the same label of "misunderstanding" as does "tranquility" as being Epicurus' primary focus. Both are tools toward pleasure, not ends in themselves. Possibly over time we'll find news ways to

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indicate "Caution!" as to outside articles that we discuss.

Post by “Bryan” of January 5, 2024 at 7:36 PM

Adding some of the sources for the Mithres event:

"When Metrodorus went down to the Peiraeus, a distance of some forty stades, to help one Mithres, a Syrian, a royal officer who had been arrested, letters went out to everyone, men and women alike, with Epicurus' solemn glorification of that journey." (Plutarch, Reply to Colotes, 1126E)

"...the letters [Epicurus] sent to his friends as he extolled and magnified Metrodorus, telling how nobly and manfully he went from town to the coast to help Mithres the Syrian, and this although Metrodorus accomplished nothing on that occasion." (Plutarch, A pleasant life is impossible 1097B)

Post by “DavidN” of January 27, 2024 at 2:53 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I have edited the title of the thread to make it more clear that "Live Unknown" falls under the same label of "misunderstanding" as does "tranquility" as being Epicurus' primary focus. Both are tools toward pleasure, not ends in themselves. Possibly over time we'll find news ways to indicate "Caution!" as to outside articles that we discuss.

Isn't "tranquility" also a form of pleasure, being the absence of turmoil, and thus is part of the goal but not the whole goal, as Epicurus encourages us to seek out a variety of pleasures.

Though I do agree living unknown is a tool or tactic not a goal, it is simply a means to avoid external turmoil.

"Meantime, you are engaged in making of yourself the sort of person in whose company you would not dare to sin. When this aim has been accomplished and you begin to hold yourself in some esteem, I shall gradually allow you to do what Epicurus, in another passage, suggests: "The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd." Seneca's Letters

Post by “Don” of January 27, 2024 at 7:05 AM

Source:

[Moral letters to Lucilius/Letter 25 - Wikisource, the free online library](#)

This is also the letter that has SIC FAC OMNIA TAMQUAM SPECTET EPICURUS:

Quote from Seneca

4. But do you yourself, as indeed you are doing, show me that you are stout-hearted; lighten your baggage for the march. None of our possessions is essential. Let us return to the law of nature; for then riches are laid up for us. The things which we actually need are free for all, or else cheap; nature craves only bread and water. No one is poor according to this standard; when a man has limited his desires within these bounds, he can challenge the happiness of Jove himself, as Epicurus says. I must insert in this letter one or two more of his sayings:[2] 5. "*Do everything as if Epicurus were watching you.*" There is no real doubt that it is good for one to have appointed a guardian over oneself, and to have someone whom you may look up to, someone whom you may regard as a witness of your thoughts. It is, indeed, nobler by far to live as you would live under the eyes of some good man, always at your side; but nevertheless I am content if you only act, in whatever you do, as you would act if anyone at all were looking on; because solitude prompts us to all kinds of evil.

Post by “DavidN” of January 27, 2024 at 2:31 PM

Ya I enjoyed Seneca, To Cassius original point for this post maybe Seneca can offer this:

Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbor's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy men, sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to

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you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.

Now that I'm reading it again I can see how some might take a missionary attitude towards epicureanism, though I think I prefer the synonym Revivalist. Either way hope this helps with your new years resolution.

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2024 at 2:34 PM

That post 15 is definitely one of my favorite things Seneca ever wrote.

Post by "DavidN" of January 27, 2024 at 2:36 PM

And for [Kalosyni](#) "I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it! 'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese."

Post by "Eikadistes" of January 27, 2024 at 5:25 PM

Turn on [to philosophy], tune in [to the teachings of Epicurus], drop out [of the frenzied chorus]. 😊