

Hercules the Epicurean (?)

Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2018 at 6:49 AM

A [good post in the Facebook group](#) raises this issue:

Herakles the Epicurean!

Herakles: Come over here and I will improve your education. You know how it is with life on this earth? I doubt it — how should you know? Just listen to me. Death's a debt all mortals must pay; there's not a person alive knows for certain if tomorrow morning will see him living or dead. As to how Fortune's plans will turn out, it's far from clear — no amount of teaching or experience can give you that knowledge. So heed my words and learn from me: be happy, drink, think each day your own as you live it and leave the rest to Luck. Give honour, too, to Kypris [1], kindest, sweetest of deities to mortals; she is a gracious goddess. As to everything else, pay it no attention, and do as I say, if you think I'm talking sense; I think I am. Let's have no more of this extravagant sadness...We're mortal men and ought to think mortal thoughts. Life for all you sour-faced enemies of pleasure, if you want my opinion, is not really life. It is a chapter of sorrows.

— Euripides, *Alcestis*, 774-802



Bliznitsa in Crimea.

Cassius: If we were trying to assess Hercules in general, presumably this part of the legend is relevant -- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Choice_of_Hercules

Poster: I wouldn't make the claim that Herakles historically really was an Epicurean. He may never have been a historical person at all.

However, in Hellenic drama he is actually generally cast as something of an Epicurean. It seems to have very early on become part of his stage character.

This seemed to me the closest one comes to a proper exposition of this stance on life he tends to take in Athenian theatre.

Euripides is the most philosophical of dramatic poets. Aristotle's favourite. So I don't think it is accident. He is putting a defensible, even attractive way of living in Herakles' mouth. Even if he has had some wine and will go off in just a minute to wrestle with Death.

It sounds, after all, a lot like Epicureanism, even if not so systematically stated (context could hardly permit that).

Cassius:

MK that sounds reasonable to me. The following section from DeWitt mentions Hercules, and I agree that it would be logical that Epicureans would have considered your point as something to discuss as well - if only we had more texts!

"... Epicurus possessed another weapon capable of administering perhaps a meaner sting. He was able to quote a passage from the Phaeacian episode in the Odyssey which seemed to be a pronouncement of the hedonistic creed in the very terminology of the Platonic-Peripatetic schools. Not only the scholium on this passage but a bevy of other notices from antiquity inform us that upon this authority Epicurus based his espousal of pleasure as the end or telos. ...

The Phaeacian king is addressed and the speaker is Odysseus: "Verily this is a beautiful thing, to be listening to a bard such as this man is, with a voice like the gods. For to my mind, I say, no consummation (telos) is nearer perfection than when rejoicing (euphrosune) prevails among the whole people and the banqueters seated in order in the halls are listening to a bard, when the tables abound in bread and meats and the wine-bearer draws the sweet drink from the mixing bowl and pours it into the cups."

The sting in this quotation is not single but multiple. To the populace, which was later incited against Epicurus, it was sacrilege, equivalent to quoting the Bible in certain circles in support of evolution. To the rival philosophers it must have been most disconcerting, not only because of the fortuitous sanction of the word telos to denote pleasure, but also because of the term

euphrosune, which to Plato and Aristotle signified a pleasure superior to hedone and denoted the enjoyment of pure reason contemplating absolute truth. As an addition to the irritation it may be mentioned that Aristotle himself had quoted the passage to demonstrate the need of music in the best education. If Homer was to be an authority on this question, why not on that of the end or telos?

Also The text of the Iliad, 24.525-526, reads: "This is the lot the gods have apportioned to miserable mortals, to live in sorrow, but no care have they themselves." To the second of these lines is found a scholium: "From this Epicurus infers that the incorruptible and blissful being has neither cares nor worries, nor occasions them to others and for this reason is susceptible of neither anger nor gratitude." These will be recognized as the words of the first of the Authorized Doctrines, and little doubt need exist that the alert and learned Epicurus quoted also the passages in which Homer speaks of the blessed gods as "living at ease," nor that he read these to mean that the gods enjoyed freedom from toil or worry (aponia).

While appealing to Homer as an authority in his teaching concerning pleasure and the life and nature of the gods, Epicurus was able also to quote Sophocles in proof of a companion principle, that pain was to be classed as evil. To this end he cited, and possibly in Mytilene, the following couplet of the Trachiniae, which describes the agonies of Heracles perishing in the fateful shirt of Nessus: "Biting, screaming in pain, and all around his moans were echoed by Locria's mountainous rocks and Euboea's beetling headlands." He may also have cited the humorous passage of Homer where the wounded god of war is described as "bellowing like nine thousand or ten thousand men when they raise the battle-cry, joining in the strife of battle." If Ares himself, like Heracles, bellowed with pain when wounded, why should not the wise man moan and wail aloud when on the rack? Pain was manifestly evil just as pleasure was manifestly good."

Cassius:

-the heading to this thread says this is your first post in this group - thank you for a good one that not only raises an interesting topic but brings out a good argument for future use. There are few more important topics than that of contrasting the goal of life between (1) virtue of and for itself, or devotion to religion, as against (2) pleasure as the reward and goal of life. I am not very familiar at all with the details of the legends about Hercules, but if the reference in the painting of "the choice of Hercules" linked above that Hercules' "reward" for the steeper path is Pegasus, then that aspect of Hercules is especially useful for understanding the Epicurean path. The modern tendency to focus on "simplicity" can be misread to mean that we look for the easiest path - when of course it is often only by hard work and exertion that we are able to achieve and maintain many of the joys that we value most.

Is it a total coincidence, I wonder, that the most extensive Epicurean library we are aware of (presumably outside the Garden itself) was in a place called Herculaneum?



Post by “Cassius” of May 4, 2018 at 1:45 PM

[In reference to](#) MK's earlier comments on Hercules, I have posted that picture again of the "Choice of Hercules" with Pegasus waiting at the top of the steep and difficult path. Again, I don't know the full context of the legend, so maybe Pegasus represents "virtue," but in my experience most people think horses are fantastic animals to watch and ride and admire and in so doing their value is PLEASURE. And a winged horse that could fly? Ten times over! So if indeed what waits at the end of the difficult road is indeed some tremendous pleasure that is worth the long and difficult journey, then OF COURSE the Epicurean would choose the harder path over the shorter and direct but lukewarm easy path! And just as Torquatus remarked to Cicero, there's nothing wrong with seeing in the winning of great battles the reward in esteem and appreciation and joy that you will get from, and share with, your fellow-citizens after having fought to protect them.

From the words of Epicurus himself: "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2018 at 6:08 AM

I am continuing to think about this and how it relates to the "low achievement" mentality that some people seem to want to take as Epicurus' message. Certainly in my mind the work of Epicurus and Lucretius were not in any sense "easy" - they were monumental achievements that were pleasurable to a certain extent while undertaken, but also involved tremendous work. What about the effort someone like you (a referenced to HD) put into your book, for another example? It is a travesty to turn Epicurus into a promoter of "the easy life" when in fact it is the goal of pleasure as the reward of all sorts of effort that is the goal. Just like Xenophon records in this passage, if the example of Hercules shows great reward from great effort, as opposed to doing what he did explicitly for no reward other than "virtue" itself, then I don't see why ancient Epicureans would not have embraced Hercules as part of the Hellenistic mythology that they would have endorsed - as part of the public festivals Epicurus endorsed.

Anyway, the point being that it would be very helpful to purge from modern Epicurean discussion the idea that Epicurus was a slacker who preached that the rewards of "indolence" are exactly the same as the rewards of pleasures that require hard work to obtain. And this not only from the practical viewpoint that indolence rarely brings sustained successful living in this world, but from observing that the pleasures that come from climbing the mountain to see the view on top are not achievable any other way.

All pleasure may be desirable, because it is pleasure, but does that observation mean that all pleasure is EQUALLY desirable? I don't think that is the correct conclusion. And this would not be because of some outside standard of virtue that some pleasures are more "noble" than others, but as simple as observing that some pleasures are more long-lasting, or intense, than others, under our individual circumstances.

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2018 at 6:18 AM

Probably in discussing (and refuting?) the idea that all pleasures are interchangeable, and that we should not care whether we spend our lives as a Hercules or a slacker, or as a lion or a worm (for example) this doctrine is relevant: "9. If every pleasure had been capable of accumulation, not only over time but also over the entire body or at least over the principal parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ from one another."

That one has always struck me as particularly difficult, but it must also be particularly important to deserve to come so high in order of the doctrines.

Post by "Cassius" of May 5, 2018 at 6:30 AM

A line I have always remembered from Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" seems to apply here: "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value." I think most of us would observe this to be true in life; therefore Epicurus would have seen the same. Is it not obvious that some choices produce pleasures that are much greater than others? And that Epicurus would counsel that we should always choose the greater pleasures over the lesser (keeping in mind the consequences, and that what appears to be greater are in fact over the long term the greater) - Again - "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2022 at 6:24 PM

This old thread comes to mind because of our discussion in the second Episode of Lucretius Today devoted to the letter to Menoecus. We were discussing the use of images as constituting subjects for focusing our attention on the type of life to which we should aspire.

Without reading all this I can't recall the details of Hercules' choice and how he eventually fared with Pleasure. But I can imagine that at least part of the story of Hercules might be useful in discussing how manufactured images of "gods" would have a beneficial effect from the Epicurean point of view.