

Welcome Rivelle!

Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2019 at 6:37 PM

Welcome [Rivelle](#) - when you get a chance please let us a little about yourself and your background with Epicurus!

Post by "Rivelle" of April 1, 2019 at 8:24 AM

The Epicurean writings on the attaining and maintaining of Ataraxia combined with Philodemus's "four-part cure" have been of notable benefit to me as someone who has a major depressive affective disorder.

My Epicurean soul is (mostly) cheerful!

My background is in English Literary History. My Phd thesis was on the Utopian Politics of John Milton's "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained".

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2019 at 9:12 AM

Glad to have you Rivelle, and glad that things are (mostly) going well for you! Sounds like you have a lot of interesting background (English literary history) so we'll look forward to discussions with you here. Thank you for joining us!

Post by "Elli" of April 1, 2019 at 10:31 AM

[Rivelle](#) welcome here ! First of all we have to point out that the greek words "ataraxia" and "aponia", as used by Epicurus are for the description of pleasure, when we have to give explanations to those that do not understand what the word PLEASURE means, and as Epicurus

says that is our intrinsic good, and our alpha and omega. And second ataraxia and aponia i.e. a life crammed full of pleasures can't be achieved without the right study of Nature and when we use without consistency the Physics the Canon and the Ethics that are one as the whole.

"In very few words, the Epicurean philosophy is coherent. Let's dare, in an inadequate way, to treat it as a coherent system, where, from any point you can go to another. Example: We know how easy it is from the friendship, that lies in the area of ethics, to go to the repulsion, that lies in the area of Physics, and the passage from Canon, that with the relation of causes and potential effects results in some stable strategy behavior, that leads to the common benefit.

Epicurus did not distinguish Canon from Physics (we still remain in the matter of coherence). It is self-evident, because Canon is structured on the atomic theory, that is, on Physics. If you dismiss the atomic theory, Canon is left suspended and collapses. So, by changing Physics, you should also change the methodology of judgment that is the Canon. You change it too. Then, when you want to find the principles of friendship, where will you look for them? Where Plato was looking for.

Epicurean philosophy protects itself with consistency. This is its self-defense. If someone tries to change one piece with another piece from elsewhere, it will end up in nothing. If not something worse than nothing". (An excerpt of a work entitled "Epicurean View" by George Kaplanis founding member of the Garden in Thessaloniki)

Post by "Elli" of April 1, 2019 at 10:42 AM

And as Cassius Amicus wrote somewhere too : Just don't get confused and think that this description implies some different type of pleasure than what you already understand the word to mean. The word "pleasure" includes every possible type of mental and physical sensation you find pleasurable, from sex to fine art to fine music to whatever. There are no "good" and "bad" pleasures - pleasure is a faculty which tells you what is pleasing - nothing more, nothing less - and it's up to you to weigh and judge the consequences and decide which pleasures to pursue.

All this is why Cicero summarized the Epicurean position as "a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures" in his Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23 ("...Nothing is preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.")

However, if you check in at the philosophy department of most any college or philosophy group on the internet, and say "Ataraxia, a state of mental tranquility free from disturbance, is the ultimate pleasure and maintaining it is how Epicureanism is applied" you will get an A+

You just have to decide whether your goal is pleasing the philosophy professors, or having a realistic understanding of what Epicurus said about how to live.

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It's not just the technical use of the word ataraxia that I want to warn about but the combination with the following sentence that implies that all that is necessary to get to this ultimate state is to *subtract* something:

"Ataraxia, a state of mental tranquility free from disturbance, is the ultimate pleasure and maintaining it is how Epicureanism is applied. This means eliminating superstitious views that cause fear or disturbance and accepting your own mortality."

Again, yes it is absolutely true that we must eliminate superstition (PD1) and eliminate fear of death (PD2). Those are the two biggest false opinions we confront so that is why they are highlighted.

But there is a THIRD false opinion - and that is that there is some goal in life higher or better or to be preferred over pleasure. God and Death aren't the only demons to swat, you also have to swat the demons that there are absolute guides to life such as virtue or "being a good person" or "following god" that everyone must follow. That's where PD3 and PD4 come in, but they are written in a technical way that makes them well-suited for debating Plato, but poorly suited for new students of the philosophy.

Every animal at birth, including humans before they are corrupted by "virtue" or "religion", knows that nature calls them to pursue the various mental and physical pleasures of life. That is a premise of the entire conversation, so you don't get to the best life just looking for demons to swat and subtracting them from life. If you sit in your garden and close off your life with no contact with any ordinary pleasures of mind and body, you have NOT reached the best life. You get to the best life by finding and pursuing those pleasures that matter to you, even if that means accepting some pain as the price. You fill your life with pleasures, make sure you've eliminated the two biggest pains (fear of god and fear of death) and then you are well on your way. Depending on your other circumstances unique to you, your life is both peaceful (free of the worst fears/pains) and crammed full of pleasures.

Post by "Martin" of April 1, 2019 at 11:33 AM

Welcome Rivelle!

Post by “Rivelle” of April 2, 2019 at 10:12 PM

Thank you for your summation of Epicurus’s system. Whilst I take your point regarding the impossibility of understanding the parts unless one has equally grasped the whole into which they are to be placed – “Don’t fear god; Don’t worry about death” is firstly to be grounded in atomistic physics from which proceeds the consequent prescriptive psychology of *modus vivendi* – I thought it might of interest to break this rule somewhat in order to attempt to explain how the subjective state of being which is *ataraxia* is helpful to those like me who have depression.

Keats’s oeuvre contains an insightful line which pertains to our purposes here: “half in love with easeful death”. Keats also wrote an Ode to Melancholy.

(Amongst the artistic representations of Melancholy, arguably the greatest is Albrecht Durer’s “Melencolia I”. See Giorgio Agamben on Durer.)

Otherwise put, “half in love with easeful death” may serve as a description of, for example, suicidal ideation; listlessness, apathy and anhedonia; unhappiness which results from the neurological conditions (depressive illness) which may result in various forms of self-negation.

Ataraxia from Pyrrho to the Stoics was a warrior’s virtue. The maintenance of clear-headed equanimity and fearlessness in the heat of battle. The place of *ataraxia* in Epicurus’s system is less straightforward. Glory-seeking activities such as warfare and conquest will not bring happiness and are manifestations of an underlying denial of mortality.

But equally, the Epicurean cheerfulness which will result when we do not worry about death (in the terms set out above, when we are not depressed, not “half in love with easeful death”) depends in part upon the stillness of mind or the equanimity which is *ataraxia*.

Possibly the influences of Indian thought on the Hellenistic philosophers may be seen here. Leaving to one side philosophical-historical questions for the moment, mindfulness meditation exercises are often recommended as one way to manage and treat depressive illness. The end-goal of meditation exercises varies with those who practise them. Most commonly, they are useful to people to help cope with the stresses of everyday life. For monks they are part of an asceticism which pierces the veils of *samsaric* illusion in accordance with their doctrine of *anattā* (Pali) or *anātman* (Sanskrit). For sufferers of depression, meditation can help them maintain their selfhood and quell the inner demons of self-negation. *Ataraxia* may be one name we could give to this healthful condition. Depressive anhedonia is an anti-thetical force which blocks Epicurean pleasures

Post by “Cassius” of April 3, 2019 at 6:00 AM

In agreeing with these last two posts, one point that strikes home to me is that there clearly are certain types of depression which are clinical/biological/genetic or whatever other "medical problem" term would be appropriate. And in those situations while a philosophy might be of some minor help, the ultimate problem is medical and has to be addressed medically.

Post by “Rivelle” of April 3, 2019 at 6:36 AM

Yes. The right medication is vital.

But philosophy can potentially help. Philosophy can be a potentially transformative *modus vivendi*. Philosophy lived in the form of *vita contemplativa* will come about naturally for most intellectual-types. Neurologically speaking, it is obviously healthy for the brain to be employed regularly performing difficult but also *pleasurable* tasks.

For Epicurus, as thinking is natural, philosophy is pleasurable.

Post by “Elli” of April 3, 2019 at 7:45 AM

Wow, here I read a greek word that is used by medical science called as "anhedonia" and means without "hedone" i.e. "pleasure". So, is here an argument that inside our body do not exist those molecular genes which are able to produce "hedone" i.e. pleasure? Where are those molecular genes? Do they exist in the neurons that make also the synapses of the brain? Do they have to do with the hormones that the brain drains into our body for its good function too?

Our epicurean friend [Elayne](#) who is a doctor will be very helpful on this issue.

Concerning me, in the first case I blame as the main guilty all the religions, all the superstitions and all those taboos with sins that from our childhood, until the age of 5 years, and then inside school, IMO are making us such persons like robots, with such kind of tangling synapses in brain to not be operated properly, with a result to be damaged, and not producing many of these

hormones such as :

The major hormones that create happy feelings are (many of the ones below also act as neurotransmitters):

- ACETYLCHOLINE: Alertness, memory, sexual performance, appetite control, release of growth hormone.
- DOPAMINE: Feelings of bliss and pleasure, euphoric, appetite control, controlled motor movements, feel focused.
- ENDORPHINS: Mood elevating, enhancing, euphoric. The more present, the happier you are! Natural pain killers.
- ENKEPHALINS: Restrict transmission of pain, reduce craving, reduce depression.
- GABA (Gamma Amino Butyric Acid): Found throughout central nervous system, anti-stress, anti-anxiety, anti-panic, anti-pain; Feel calm, maintain control, focus.
- MELATONIN: “Rest and recuperation” and “anti-aging” hormone. Regulates body clock.
- NOREPINEPHRINE: Excitatory, feel happy, alert, motivated. Anti-depressant, appetite control, energy, sexual arousal.
- OXYTOCIN: Stimulated by Dopamine. Promotes sexual arousal, feelings of emotional attachment, desire to cuddle.
- PHENYLETHYLAMINE (PEA): Feelings of bliss, involved in feelings of infatuation (high levels found in chocolate).
- SEROTONIN: Promotes and improves sleep, improves self esteem, relieves depression, diminishes craving, prevents agitated depression and worrying.

The study of Nature that is through the Epicurean Philosophy may help if the persons understand that there are molecular genes inside us that are allies for the purpose of our survival. If someone connects the survival with the driving force of Pleasure, that someone is the right way for doing the huge SWERVE - Parenglisi imo.

Post by “Elayne” of April 4, 2019 at 6:14 PM

Elli, yes, there is a molecular basis to pleasure (and pain), and the molecules you mention are the final common pathway in a range of initial causes. For instance, hypothyroidism can result

in depression/ loss of pleasure, and it is treated by giving the patient thyroid hormone. Heart disease can cause depression, as well as multiple brain disorders such as multiple sclerosis. The old division between psychiatry and neurology is false and probably needs to be removed. For instance, there is evidence for multiple factors in schizophrenia, including inflammation in the brain as a cause! I have seen some early research proposing to use anti-inflammatory agents developed for multiple sclerosis-- to treat schizophrenia. The brain is so fascinating.

We evolved to have social pains as a warning maybe the group was going to reject us, which would be dangerous to early humans-- emotional pain can sometimes be relieved with a regular pain reliever like ibuprofen!

One very important thing to remember is that the effectiveness of a treatment does not prove the original cause. For instance, strep throat is not a penicillin shortage and a broken leg is not a cast shortage. So some cases of lost pleasure can be treated with therapy, but that doesn't mean the cause was not biological. And some social injury loss of pleasure can be treated with medication.

And yes, Cassius, I think it is important that if people have loss of pleasure, they should see a physician for a thorough evaluation. Loss of ability to feel pleasure is a different thing from not currently getting a lot of pleasure. If someone still is able to feel pleasure, and has no other symptoms of depression, they may just need to plan their lives more effectively. But if they can't feel it even with an activity that used to create pleasure, this means something medical is going on-- depression or something else.

That is one of the things I do in my work-- I make sure to do a very thorough history and exam for my patients with mood symptoms. I have seen far too many children who were diagnosed with depression or the like and what they really had was something else, like sleep apnea. Once we fix the underlying problem, they can enjoy life-- then the thing to do is make sure to plan for pleasure!

Post by “Rivelle” of April 4, 2019 at 6:57 PM

Ellie,

In historical context, Epicurus's great genius lay in the natural scientific grounding of his system. Understood as a *modus vivendi*, this means the human being as a knowing subject is equally a **corporeal** subject. Thus **pleasure** can serve as our guiding light on our paths as we seek the True and the Good, within which our lives must also dwell. Our bodies are ever-present in our lives and therefore if we know the nature of true pleasure, properly understood, we will

have happiness, truth and ethical guidance.

This is in marked contrast to the disputational, dialogical and dialectical natures of rival philosophical schools. Here we are, two and half thousand years later and Plato and his interlocutors have still not stopped arguing!! And what's even worse, they are **still** arguing about **first** principles!! (I exaggerate for comic effect of course, but hopefully my point is clear).

Of the mental, emotional and affective disorders prevalent today, some can be seen to be historically new and unique to our modern 20th and 21st century historical period - (eating disorders; other types of body dysphoria; "germaphobia"; OCD; personality disorders are always just as historical as are the prevailing and typical personality types of the contextual historical period.)

Whilst other types of disorder can be observed to have occurred throughout recorded human history. Depression (otherwise known by other names such as "melancholy" etc) is a longstanding condition that humans seem to have been prone to for millennia. Your pointing to the causes as being superstition, religion, fear of the gods etc is a very Epicurean thing to say. But it fails to take into account the **usefulness** and valuable function that depression and sadness can play in an otherwise normal, healthy and functioning life.

Briefly put, a mental illness is the condition wherein a cognitive and emotional faculty becomes disassociated and then, further, hyper-activated such that it becomes problematic for well-being.

But depression has been with human beings for so long as it also has a very **useful** emotional and mental function. It is good to stop taking a path of action which has become a bad one, possibly become "depressed" about one's previous actions, stop and take stock and then, ideally, reflect and choose a better and brighter path.

Consider Albrecht Durer's "Melencolia I", that I referred to in my post above.



Note the thoughtfulness upon the Angel of Melancholy's face. The many engineering instruments of measurement: the callipers, the weighing scales, the table of numbers upon the wall. The incomplete building block of granite. Finally, the angels gaze takes us to the shining sunburst of glorious light in the top left of the picture. The bright horizon which thought and creation, which may require the concentrated reflection of melancholic silence, can lead us to.

Post by "bradley.whitley" of April 5, 2019 at 1:37 PM

What is the true and the good? Pleasure is pleasure.

Post by "bradley.whitley" of April 5, 2019 at 1:39 PM

As much as we ascribe good and bad to hypothetical states of being, we undermine our Master's teaching. The master was not a Platonist.

Post by "Cassius" of April 5, 2019 at 4:01 PM

[Quote from bradley.whitley](#)

As much as we ascribe good and bad to hypothetical states of being,

I think over time that is one of the most important lessons of all. How can there be something good and bad in itself, if there is no central authority stamping "good" and "bad" on it? Which means that ultimately it's only pleasure and pain given to us by Nature that serves as the "stamper." But then we go and get confused and think that our particular stamp does or should apply to everyone. Yes it's true that it does seem to apply to people who are like ourselves, but to people who are raised or for whatever reason see things differently, their view is as justified for them as our view is to us.

Post by "Elayne" of April 6, 2019 at 6:07 PM

[Quote from Rivelle](#)

Yes, Rivelle, I agree with Bradley, -- I am concerned about your use above of "the True and the Good"-- and would add that the human being is nothing but a corporeal subject. Our bodies aren't just ever-present in our lives-- we are literally our bodies. There is no such thing as "true pleasure"- -vs "untrue pleasure"-- all pleasure is pleasure, but some brings pain along with it, and if the net result is pain? That is something to avoid.

What is pleasure for you vs pain and for me-- those things can vary. But the underlying goal of pleasure should not vary, if we are both practicing Epicurean Philosophy.

I say that in the spirit of friendship, because I do not want you to miss out on the full benefit of the Philosophy, for your overall happiness.

Post by "Rivelle" of April 7, 2019 at 5:40 AM

Thank you for these replies.

"The True and the Good" has become a rather ingrained phrase (or what amounts to a singular

concept) for my way of thinking for sometime now. As you all have pointed out this is indeed most likely Platonic. Or Christian (though I am not religious).

Most specifically, I think I took it from having read a lot of Hegel. "The True and the Good" might be seen as very rough approximation of Hegel's Absolute. Slavoj Zizek's version of Hegel's Absolute is a notably heterodox one. however.

I will certainly reflect further upon your replies and read further in Epicurus's thought and that of his followers. Maybe it's just the (revolutionary?) tonic that I need! 😊