

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

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Hi friends, I would love to hear your input on this subject.

Epicureanism, although best described as a school of thought rather than a code of conduct, has definite ethical implications. In asking, "what ought I do," the Epicurean might advise "that which contributes most to your happiness." All ethical theories have an underlying value structure. Hedonism and utilitarianism value happiness as the sole good, although their theories differ considerably in how that happiness ought be distributed.

Epicureanism also values happiness/pleasure as the sole good. It is the ultimate good by which all other goods claim their worth. Here is the counter-intuitive part: in striving solely for happiness, do we end up falling short of the goal?

A foolish Epicurean might engage in illicit behavior, for example, injecting heroin, as that action elevates his happiness to extreme heights. But this is unsustainable and results in less happiness in the long-run. A sophisticated Epicurean, then, would recognize that he must often times seek happiness in a more roundabout way - indeed, even through suffering.

There is no problem with this so far. But what if, in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate goal, we end up not truly achieving it? If we are to prioritize happiness over all else, then everything else becomes a means to an end. Our relationships, our loved ones, our talents, careers, and projects, are only valuable in their ultimate ability to bring us happiness to us. Is this the right way to view them? I understand that this is a *fact* if happiness should be seen as the ultimate good. I believe it should be. But in viewing all of these aspects of life as a means to an end, do we lose a certain connection with them that is only possible if they are viewed as ends in themselves?

Let me try to make this less abstract of a discussion. Pretend, for example, that I am a man with a wife, two kids, and a horrible job. I work because I need to provide for my family. But I am miserable all the time, as I work most of my days and only come home to watch TV for an hour and sleep. If I am only tending to a family and job as a means to an ultimate end - my own happiness - should I not simply quit my job and leave my family, move to Costa Rica with my savings, and live a relaxing life on the beach? Surely friends are integral for happiness, but it would be easy to make new friends. If I have no moral integrity nor empathy, my knowledge of the immense pain I must have brought my family would not even bother me. Maybe I am a more *effective* Epicurean for lacking this moral character altogether. Let's assume I am snide enough to hide my nature.

I have found in my own life that if I conduct my life in a manner that I can be proud of (ie, with strong moral principles), then generally I find my relationships improve. There are certain sacrifices that must be made that are irrational in a framework of happiness as one's only true goal. These sacrifices may not immediately appear to eventually increase one's own net happiness, but in fact do. Sometimes certain sacrifices and struggles appear to lead only to more sacrifice and struggle, rather than to happiness. A sophisticated Epicurean may very well abandon these toils for the path that visibly leads to happiness. But what if, at the end of the tunnel, the light that exposed itself is dimmer than the light that hid in the darkness?

I have arrived personally at this conclusion: to truly achieve happiness, I should live by virtue ethics and become the best person I can be. Become a virtuous person - honest, resilient, tempered, loyal - and a happy life will follow. It seems happiness is most attracted to the good man, rather than the man who is not willing to do things which have an obscured connection to happiness. This is just my opinion that I have arrived at through personal experience.

So - the decision procedure for action: virtue ethics. The sole good, and the truth about our existence: Epicureanism. I have always noticed a huge amount of interplay between Stoicism and Epicureanism despite their differences and fights.

What do you all think? Are certain toils impossible to rationally engage under an Epicurean framework? Does moral character allow for more happiness, or does it restrict happiness? 😊
Looking forward to your input.