

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Cassius" of January 9, 2019 at 10:56 AM

Pivot I agree with Hiram's post but would add this. If indeed your calculation of how to pursue happiness ends up not achieving happiness, then you have by definition miscalculated your means. And by concluding that there are a certain set of tools that should be pursued in themselves, rather than with your eye on the goal, then you are again making the classic mistake of putting means before the end, guaranteeing that you will in fact miss the mark (since the mark is not your goal).

It sounds like you have probably read the extended discussion of this topic [under the name of Torquatus in "On Ends"](#) or [at Epicurus.net](#) but if you have not that is one of the best explanations of this issue.

The essential point is that there is really no contradiction in the Epicurean procedure. Happy living is pleasurable living - the dominance of pleasure over pain over the course of a lifetime. And that includes all kinds of pleasure, both physical and mental -- every kind you can think of, including the pleasures of the relationships you are talking about. If you walk away from your relationships to pursue short-term hedonism, then you will be plagued with the regrets and emotional pains of the consequences of your action for the rest of your life. Epicurus also indicates that for example if you betray a friend your life will be thrown into such disarray at times you should give up your own life for that of a friend.

So I think an Epicurean would respond to your analysis by affirming two points: (1) that Epicurus was very clear that we are talking about long term net pain over time - not the pleasures of the moment, and (2) that Epicurus was also very clear that pleasure means ALL KINDS of pleasure, including mental/emotional pleasures of all kinds, and that indeed mental / emotional pleasures can often be more intense and of greater concern than physical pleasures.

So your conclusion that "virtue ethics" are of use to you in attaining happiness does not contradict Epicurus at all, as you would already suspect due to PD5 "It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life."

But if you ever make the mistake of forgetting that virtue ethics are a means to the greater end of pleasure, and not an end in themselves, then you are setting yourself up for disappointment by "freezing in" intermediate tools that may work at one moment, but be disastrous at the next

moment. And it is inevitable that no tool is ALWAYS going to work, because there is no "fate," no "god-given laws" that apply at all times and places and to all people.

And all this is why we quote [Diogenes Laertius' formulation](#) so often:

"If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point."

Please follow up with us on your thoughts in response to these points because this is one of the most important aspects of Epicurean philosophy.