

Calculus, Minimalism, Consumerism, Finding the Path

Post by "Garden Dweller" of October 11, 2019 at 10:28 PM

When one makes lifestyle decisions, how does one apply hedonistic calculus?

Sample decisions:

Should I eat healthy food or food that tastes good but has long term negative health effects?

If I reduce the number of things that I own, my life is simplified, but what if I start to get bored with my minimalist situation?

Some luxuries are very pleasing, but I can't afford them, should I get a second job to pay for them?

Did Epicurus recommend a certain lifestyle?

Does Epicurus recommend eating simple food and growing one's food in a garden?

Would living in a garden and harvesting one's food be a life to strive for as a student of Epicurus?

Post by "Cassius" of October 11, 2019 at 10:50 PM

Garden Dweller in any discussion like this the text that immediately comes to mind is [VS63](#). I don't think it is cited very often by modern commentators and it is clear why they don't:

The Bailey version is "**63. Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess.**"

and Epicurus.net has a more clear version: "**63. There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.**"

With the key point being that it is incorrect to look for a one-size fits all formula. "Simplicity" as a goal is as wrong as "luxury" as a goal. The goal can only be defined properly as "pleasure" and the circumstances under which each individual is going to experience the most pleasure

will differ by time and place and individual, as you would expect in an atomistic, non-fated, "free will" human situation.

Yes it is true that Epicurus generally recommends a simple lifestyle, but he explains why very clearly: not so that we will never have luxury, but so that we will have no issues when luxury is not available. My view is that this of course makes sense as a general rule, but the problem is that lots of people (natural stoics) get carried away with ANY kind of rule, and they begin to worship the rule and forget that the goal was always, is always, and will always be "pleasure" in the broad sense of that term - including all mental and physical pleasures.

I know we were talking in your earlier thread about the issue of time, and I think that's a huge issue. It's clearly not appropriate to elevate "long-term pleasure" in every case over "short term pleasure" because time is no magical element that turns a long life of minimum pleasures into something that's intrinsically better than a life that is shorter but more filled with "stronger" pleasures.

It seems to me that it's very difficult to put any kind of "measurement" on pleasure other than what we ourselves end up judging it from our own personal perspectives.

This is an area that [Elayne](#) has some good ideas in, and maybe she will comment, but in the end the first and most important thing to keep in mind in discussing your question is how individual the answer is, and how it's counterproductive to think or look for a general rule that everyone must follow all the time.

So to tackle your last two specific questions:

"Does Epicurus recommend eating simple food and growing one's food in a garden?" << There are definitely texts that talk about bread and water and cheese as illustrative of simply living while still being able to compete with Zeus for happiness, but there is absolutely no evidence that the Garden itself lived that way on a regular basis, and I think Epicurus was making a rhetorical point in the context of the issue we are addressing here, that proper lifestyle is contextual. Remember what Epicurus disposed of in his will -- he had significant property, and even slaves, and there is no way to reconcile that (other than calling him a hypocrite) with the idea that he recommended across-the-board frugality.

"Would living in a garden and harvesting one's food be a life to strive for as a student of Epicurus?" It might be, or it might not, depending on circumstances. I know that I personally spend as much time in "the country" as I can, and I can see myself raising vegetables or even chickens in the future, but I do not now and have no immediate plans to do so. If you personally would enjoy that, then you should. But the idea of devoting yourself to a farm lifestyle if you really don't like doing it is likely going to make no sense at all from an hedonic calculus point of view.

Maybe the final point to make is that it's empowering or even scary to think how much of all this is in our own hands, and that we have to decide for ourselves, but I think that's compelled

by the nature of the Epicurean universe in which there are no gods telling us what to do and no "ideal patterns" to go by either -- not even any absolute standards of virtue or justice. We're really no different than any other animal -- we're here for only a short time and the best we can do for ourselves is use our time as productively as possible -- with "productively" being judged by the "feeling" we get from our life.

Post by "Cassius" of October 11, 2019 at 10:54 PM

Also, it may seem trite to cite this one, but I think the points in the last post add up to this one, Vatican Saying 71:

Question each of your desires: "What will happen to me if that which this desire seeks is achieved, and what if it is not?"

That may not seem like much help as a general rule, but it reinforces how **circumstances are subjective and will lead to different choices in different situations.**

Post by "Godfrey" of October 12, 2019 at 12:20 AM

Quote

Maybe the final point to make is that it's empowering or even scary to think how much of all this is in our own hands, and that we have to decide for ourselves, but I think that's compelled by the nature of the Epicurean universe in which there are no gods telling us what to do and no "ideal patterns" to go by either -- not even any absolute standards of virtue or justice. We're really no different than any other animal -- we're here for only a short time and the best we can do for ourselves is use our time as productively as possible -- with "productively" being judged by the "feeling" we get from our life.

Well said Cassius! This relates to the discussion going on in other threads about the philosophy being a complete system beginning with a world view (physics) and working it's way to the practical application and consequences of that world view.

It's easy to take the physics for granted as it's more or less accepted scientific knowledge these days. Growing up in a primarily monotheistic culture which is at the same time science based,

at some point it's necessary to really dig into the ramifications of the physics, and at that point it is "empowering or even scary" to embark on the Epicurean path.

Regarding choices and the hedonic calculus, I've been experimenting with what I might loosely call "Epicurean mindfulness". It's a fledgling attempt to apply the Canon to choices, and I guess the main benefit is to use it as a structure to maximize intuition and feelings. Basically it goes like this:

- Name the problem at hand
- Observe: what do I know about it, what do my senses tell me?
- Pause: just stop, and allow my intuitive mind to do it's work. The feelings tend to weigh in here, probably because I'm not drowning them out with thinking.
- Sometimes that's it; sometimes I add the thought of acting to maximize pleasure and see where that leads.

It's not a formula, but sometimes it's a useful tool in the toolbox fwiw.

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2019 at 3:05 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

It's easy to take the physics for granted as it's more or less accepted scientific knowledge these days.

I've been thinking a lot about this. It is certainly true to a degree, but there are important limitations. It is almost like, today, many of the details have been accepted, but the implications have been divorced from them and totally lost.

With the advent of the omnipotent / omniscient version of god, the problem of "how does a god control what we now know to be atoms, and to be endless space" has been overthrown. No one cares that the universe is endless, or eternal, and so they do not realize that Epicurean physics makes universe-creating gods impossible, of means that humans are not at all alone in the universe, or that the Earth is not at the center and therefore the center of God's attention. Much less the idea that the constant movement of the atoms means that nothing that comes together stays together, nothing is immortal except the universe itself, or that - with nothing conceivable to exist except atoms and void - there cannot possibly be any eternal absolute "ten commandment" rules that apply to all people at all times and all places.

So we may not need to read the details of Epicurean theories of thunder and lightning, but we definitely still need to step through the process to make sure we understand the same implications that they did -- implications that make most of the ethical and philosophical conclusions of the modern world absolutely absurd.

Post by “Garden Dweller” of October 12, 2019 at 2:16 PM

Here is an attempt to describe "Hedonistic Calculus" as it might be applied today.

Rational Behavior Decisionmaking

Levels of Behavior Decisionmaking

Present Moment Distress Reduction

Be attentive to one's body and respond to distress in the present moment.

One should constantly monitor your body's senses: are you sitting comfortably, are your clothes and shoes comfortable, are you warm or cold, are you hungry or thirsty, do you have any mental stress or physical discomfort? When you sense any of these distress indicators, take action to remedy the discomfort as soon as you can.

Present Moment Positive Emotion Enhancement

Over one's life, one should learn specific behaviors that enhance feelings of joy, kindness, love, grace and other positive emotions (pleasurable emotions). Behaviors which bring pleasure might include calling a friend for a conversation, preparing a meal, writing a poem, taking a nap, designing a project, organizing one's desk, reading a book or going for a walk. The behaviors which an individual finds pleasurable are individual to that person. Each person must make themselves aware of the types of behaviors which enhance one's positive emotions, and in the present moment, should select that behavior which the individual feels would be most pleasurable. It may be helpful to make a list of behaviors that have been enjoyable in the past to help one remember the options that one has in the present moment.

Future Distress Reduction

There are a number of problems which one can avoid in the future by taking action today. Examples are preparing a financial budget to avoid a lack of funds, exercising to improve future health, medical care to heal a wound, working today to avoid future poverty, brushing one's teeth to avoid tooth decay. Select this type of preventative behavior when a relatively minor negative experience today will prevent a major discomfort tomorrow.

Future Positive Emotion Enhancement

Some actions one can do today can reap benefits in the future. Examples are planting a seed to enjoy the future crop, getting an education which will improve one's career, investing savings so that one may enjoy free time from employment. Select this type of action strategically, with a consideration as to risk and reward, in particular regarding what one is giving up today.

Suggestions for starting out with a system of rational behavior choices:

Make a list of foods which cause indigestion or other problems and avoid them.

Make a list of things which you enjoy doing and which bring pleasure, so you can refer back to them when you have time and don't know what to do.

Make a list of preventative actions you wish to take and know how they need to be applied in order to be effective.

Imagine the type of life one would like to have in the future and ask oneself what can one do today to bring that life into effect.

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2019 at 2:21 PM

I think that's a good start on a practical approach, and it certainly illustrates the process!

This reminds me Garden Dweller of our fairly recent discussion of a "Pleasure Maximization Worksheet." If you have not seen that you might find it interesting to bounce your current thinking against that approach. I did not end up developing it further for a variety of reasons, but what you are doing is similar to any approach which provides suggested guidelines and suggests a way to weigh and balance the result: [A Draft Epicurean Pleasure Maximization Worksheet](#)

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2019 at 6:16 PM

Just glancing over the forums I see the thread is entitled "...Finding THE Path." Maybe that is one of our points here, that there is not a single path for everyone, not even a single best path for the same person. However, maybe no matter the number of paths, it is correct to call it direct or straight(?)

Which reminds me to compare this passage from the opening of Lucretius 6:

Munro: "

He therefore cleansed men's breasts with truth-telling precepts and fixed a limit to lust and fear and explained what was the chief good which we all strive to reach, and **pointed out the road** along which by a short cross-track we might arrive at it in a straightforward course; he showed too what evils existed in mortal affairs throughout, rising up and manifoldly flying about by a natural -call it chance or force, because nature had so brought it about - and from what gates you must sally out duly to encounter each; and he proved that mankind mostly without cause arouse in their breast the melancholy tumbling billows of cares."

Bailey:

"And so with his discourse of truthful words he purged the heart and set a limit to its desire and fear, and set forth what is the highest good, towards which we all strive, and pointed out the path, whereby along a narrow track we may strain on towards it in a straight course; he showed what there is of ill in the affairs of mortals everywhere, coming to being and flying abroad in diverse forms, be it by the chance or the force of nature, because nature had so brought it to pass; he showed from what gates it is meet to sally out against each ill, and he proved that 'tis in vain for the most part that the race of men set tossing in their hearts the gloomy billows of care."

Daniel Brown 1743:

"

And therefore he purged the mind by true philosophy, and set bounds to our desires and our fears. He laid open to us the chief good, that point of happiness we all aim at, in what it consists, and showed us the direct way that leads to it, and puts us into the straight road to obtain it."

Post by "Godfrey" of October 12, 2019 at 6:51 PM

Bailey continues: "...the gloomy billows of care. For even as children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are no whit more to be feared than what children shudder at in the dark and imagine will come to pass. This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered not by the rays and the gleaming shafts of day, but **by the outer view and the inner law of nature.**"

Or Smith: "...This terrifying darkness that enshrouds the mind must be dispelled not by the sun's rays and the dazzling darts of day, but **by study of the superficial aspect and underlying principle of nature.**"

Post by "Garden Dweller" of October 17, 2019 at 2:46 PM

If there is an activity which you particularly enjoy, for example, a morning walk or afternoon tea, deliberately schedule these activities on your calendar so they don't get neglected and double booked by more mundane tasks and responsibilities.

Post by "Cassius" of October 17, 2019 at 2:50 PM

Lately I have been trying to discipline myself to transcribe at least a couple of paragraphs of Lucretius every morning before work, and that has been a help to make sure I get it done and prevent it from being pushed aside. These are pretty ordinary observations and there's nothing magic in them, but routine and habit can be very helpful.

Post by "Garden Dweller" of October 17, 2019 at 3:09 PM

In order to use reason to live a life worthy of the gods, one applies rational decisionmaking to ones life. Rational decisionmaking is based on the philosophy of Epicurus and involves selecting one's behavior and activities, including:

Which activities we choose to do each day

Which people we associate with

How we speak to and treat other people

Recognizing nature through our senses

Distinguishing between pleasure and pain, and determining which actions or events led to the experience of pleasure or pain

Post by “Hiram” of October 18, 2019 at 9:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I know we were talking in your earlier thread about the issue of time, and I think that's a huge issue. It's clearly not appropriate to elevate "long-term pleasure" in every case over "short term pleasure" because time is no magical element that turns a long life of minimum pleasures into something that's intrinsically better than a life that is shorter but more filled with "stronger" pleasures.

I don't think they're mutually contradictory.

Yes VS 14 says we should not postpone our pleasure. But elsewhere, the founders also say that we should make what is ahead of us sweeter than what is behind us.

Post by “Cassius” of October 18, 2019 at 10:00 AM

Right they aren't mutually contradictory at all, but that's the point: it would be wrong to **always** think that long-term is better.

Post by “Hiram” of October 18, 2019 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from Garden Dweller](#)

Did Epicurus recommend a certain lifestyle?

Does Epicurus recommend eating simple food and growing one's food in a garden?

Would living in a garden and harvesting one's food be a life to strive for as a student of Epicurus?

Concerning should we have a Garden, we should go to the first elements of the teaching. Here, the issue is autarchy (self-sufficiency), which is probably the most long-term existential project

that we have to work on. How do we engage productively in the world while still enjoying a life of pleasure?

Philodemus of Gadara wrote a scroll "On the art of property management" which delves a bit into this. But these conversations must be rooted in modern reality. He does not even mention gardening, although it fits within the broader idea of having multiple streams of income in order to facilitate a life of leisure and pleasure. Instead he prioritizes:

1. taking fees from the teaching of philosophy
2. accepting rental income from our properties
3. entrepreneurial income (employing others to work for us)

in that order. He also recommends ownership of means of production, and mentions the importance of associating with good friends and of delegating tasks as means to secure pleasure while being productive. Here are some of my gleanings from the scroll on property management, which you can find on amazon (linked from the essay).

<http://societyofepicurus.com/on-philodemus-...agement-part-i/>

<http://societyofepicurus.com/on-philodemus-...agement-part-ii/>

Post by "Cassius" of October 18, 2019 at 11:37 AM

To add to Hiram's point, we know that Epicurus also had slaves, so that would obviously not be a lifestyle that we can or should duplicate. That's a pretty dramatic example of the dangers of thinking that Epicurus himself lived a particularly ascetic / minimal existence, which I don't think the facts would support. In addition, I am not aware that any of the other examples of specific Epicureans we know about from history were noted for gardening or raising their own sustenance or really were in any way associated with an ascetic or minimalist lifestyle.

I think Hiram's leads on the Property Management material are probably more practical examples, with the goal being more "intelligent" and/or "sustainable" lifestyle choices, suitable to the level of means we are confident we can support and sustain, rather than geared toward minimalist or ascetic, but other than the links Hiram provides I don't have good online links to the direct reference material. That would be particularly interesting to look back at, because I don't recall every reading that Philodemus' material advises anything that is particularly ascetic, nor did he himself live that way if in fact he lived or taught in the area of what Julius Caesar's father-in-law's library at Herculaneum.