

Proselytising and pleasure: compatible?

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 6, 2022 at 4:34 PM

Hey all,

After only a few minutes delved into Norman DeWitt's book, I begin to understand why it's so recommended here. It certainly is an experience I wouldn't expect at all!

Nevertheless, I'm a bit confused about the part where the author writes about the proselytising of Epicureans, specifically: the handbooks and scrolls written by Epicurus. How is this compatible with the pursuit of pleasure? If I want to enjoy pleasure with the least amount of pain, I won't go out into the world and proclaim to know the truth. Sometimes, I walk around at the r/exchristian subreddit, and many people there would be very injured if I began proselytising on the glory of Jesus. If I now imagine exactly the same situation, but with ex-Epicureans (for whatever reason), I would inflict a lot of pain on me if I reopened their past wounds.

So, to sum it up: how does proselytising and spreading the message of Epicurus help me in my personal pursuit of pleasure? Obviously, I would tell my friend if he's interested in it, because I would gain a lot of pleasure from that. But I most certainly wouldn't gain pleasure from going around, from door to door, and spreading the word of Epicurus.

(And yes, I have the feeling that I have some sort of logical fallacy here, but I'm not sure where...)

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 4:39 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

But I most certainly wouldn't gain pleasure from going around, from door to door, and spreading the word of Epicurus.

YOU wouldn't do that, WE wouldn't do that, and neither would the Epicurean mentioned in Lucian's "Aristotle the Oracle-Monger" after getting this advice from Lucian: <https://epicurism.info/etexts/Alexander.html>

Quote

On one occasion, indeed, an Epicurean got himself into great trouble by daring to expose him before a great gathering. He came up and addressed him in a loud voice, 'Alexander, it was you who induced So-and-so the Paphlagonian to bring his slaves before the governor of Galatia, charged with the murder of his son who was being educated in Alexandria. Well, the young man is alive, and has come back, to find that the slaves had been cast to the beasts by your machinations." What had happened was this: The lad had sailed up the Nile, gone on to a Red Sea port, found a vessel starting for India, and been persuaded to make the voyage. He being long overdue, the unfortunate slaves supposed that he had either perished in the Nile or fallen a victim to some of the pirates who infested it at that time; so they came home to report his disappearance. Then followed the oracle [indicting the slaves with murder], the sentence, and finally the young man's return with the story of his absence.

All this the Epicurean recounted. Alexander was much annoyed by the exposure, and could not stomach so well deserved an affront; he directed the company to stone the man, on pain of being involved in his impiety and called Epicureans. However, when they set to work, a distinguished Pontic called Demonstratus, who was staying there, rescued him by interposing his own body; the man had the narrowest possible escape from being stoned to death—as he richly deserved to be; what business had he to be the only sane man in a crowd of madmen, and needlessly make himself the butt of Paphlagonian infatuation?

You're providing the answer to your own question by pointing out that it would defy common sense to go around preaching indiscriminately.

And as we know, Epicurus held ALL of these are true:

[PD16](#). In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters, reason has ordained, and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain.

[VS41](#). We must laugh and philosophize at the same time, and do our household duties, and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

VS52. Friendship dances around the world, bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 6, 2022 at 4:43 PM

So basically, would that mean that one should tell his friends about the philosophy, about whom one knows that they might enjoy it, but abstain from proselytising complete strangers?

Because that would make far more sense, and align with human nature in a far better way than the Christian proselytising does, at least as far as I can tell.

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 4:50 PM

First, yes: There's no divine commandment or categorical imperative to save everyone in the world, as the Christians argue to be the case. Your own pleasure and that of your friends is ultimately the only natural standard for what to pursue. Of course that ends up meaning all sorts of other things in regard to virtue and relations with others and trying to be on good terms with them as well, but ultimately it all comes down to the feelings that nature provides, and that varies according to "who else" you are talking about. Your friends evoke stronger feelings of pleasure than do random strangers.

Also

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

If I want to enjoy pleasure with the least amount of pain, I won't go out into the world and proclaim to know the truth

I would caution to be very precise with this formulation. I do not think it is correct exactly as written, although I probably say it that way often myself -- too loosely.

I think the proper approach would be a combination of several considerations, primarily:

1. You're looking for the maximum pleasure you can achieve at a cost in pain that you find worthwhile. (which is not the same as "the least amount of pain.") And in proof of that I would cite exactly what you did about the effort that Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans put into their work and the peril that came their way because of it.
2. Only you can determine what amount of pain is justifiable - there are no absolute standards of ranking pain or pleasure. (I don't think any Epicurean would argue that there is, and that includes the natural and necessary discussion, which doesn't add up to an absolute standard either. I would assert - and do ad nauseum - that those who assert "tranquility" or some other kind of "fancy pleasure" is the "best" pleasure are flat-out wrong under Epicurean theory and reality.)
3. Everyone experiences some pain in life; only the Epicurean god category would be theoretically able to avoid all pain. (I think everyone here would take that position

- regardless of their views of what Epicurus meant by "gods.")
4. There are almost always going to be limitations when you attempt to start starting the goal in words more precise than "pleasure." I would say that is because there are natural limitations in the ability of words to capture feelings, and Epicurus ultimately says that the proof of his position that pleasure is to be pursued and pain avoided comes from observing the infants of all species before they are corrupted with false ideas. That's an observational standard rather than a conceptual formula, and I think there are deep reasons why conceptual formulas are always going to be lacking, just like a map is never a complete recreation of the territory described, just an outline.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 6, 2022 at 5:00 PM

No proselytising in order to save lost souls who don't want to be saved? Sounds good to me!

And, regarding the second part of your message- in some way, „between the lines“, I meant what you wrote. A major part of my rejection of Buddhism is that I believe that sometimes, it's a good thing to endure some pain in order to enjoy far more pleasure afterwards. Why reject all pain and live a humble life, yet miss out on many possibilities to experience pleasures and joy?

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 5:04 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

A major part of my rejection of Buddhism is that I believe that sometimes, it's a good thing to endure some pain

I don't have much experience on that myself, but I can guarantee you that you and a large number of others here at the forum who have taken a detour through Buddhism can "commune" on that topic at extreme length! 😊

(Not sure what the "cute" term for the Buddhist practice would be but I bet there is one.)

Post by “Don” of January 6, 2022 at 5:16 PM

[Epicurean Sage](#)

My goal in this translation of Diogenes Laertius's Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book X.117-121, was to be as literal as possible to preserve the flavor of...
sites.google.com

Here's my take:

Quote

The wise one will not make fine speeches, (118) but will only give public readings upon request. (120) The wise one will not get caught up in political offices nor strive to be an absolute ruler, the ultimate political office. (119) Nor will they be a Cynic nor a beggar. (119) Nor will the wise one be anxious about their burial (118). Additionally, the wise one will set up statues but will be indifferent to ones being set up in their honor. (120) The sage will leave behind writings like prose works, treatises, and written speeches, but will not make celebratory speeches in the public assemblies. (120) The sage will be fond of the countryside, enjoying being outside the towns and cities. (120) The wise one will also pay just enough attention to their reputation as to avoid being looked down upon. (120) Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly. (119) Only the wise man will be competent to discuss music and poetry without writing poems of their own. (120) The sage will found a school, but not in a way that attracts a crowd around themselves or plays to the mob. (120)

Post by “Cassius” of January 6, 2022 at 5:44 PM

Also on this topic, in terms of "spreading the word to new people," another obvious observation is that since of the things we pursue to ensure a happy life by far the greatest is the acquisition of friends, and since it is also clear (i would assert) that we want friends who see the world the way we Epicureans do, then it is logical that some amount of effort is going to be spent on spreading the word so as to increase the number of your Epicurean friends.

Post by “Don” of January 6, 2022 at 10:52 PM

Quote from Diogenes Laertius, Book X.9

"For our philosopher has abundance of witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men--his native land, which honoured him with statues in bronze ; his friends, so many in number that they could hardly be counted by whole cities, and indeed all who knew him, held fast as they were by the siren-charms of his doctrine..."

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, BOOK X, EPICURUS \(341-271 B.C.\)](#)

So, the school of Epicurus was widespread and long-lived throughout the ancient world. In many ways, it could be called "evangelical" in the literal sense of "spreading the good news." However, I get the impression that there were NOT Epicurean missionaries but rather it spread from individual to individual. Then, if a particularly wealthy Epicurean in a particular city was able to open their house or garden to others, that would start a Garden (κήπος kēpos) in that city to serve as a school and meeting place.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 7, 2022 at 2:34 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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That makes sense!

[Quote from Don](#)

So, the school of Epicurus was widespread and long-lived throughout the ancient world. In many ways, it could be called "evangelical" in the literal sense of "spreading the good news." However, I get the impression that there were NOT Epicurean missionaries but rather it spread from individual to individual. Then, if a particularly wealthy Epicurean in a particular city was able to open their house or garden to others, that would start a Garden (κήπος kēpos) in that city to serve as a school and meeting place.

Honestly a shame that this practice was lost to time, I would love to visit such a garden with a smiling Epicurean and a lot of good friends in it!

Post by “Don” of January 7, 2022 at 5:53 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Honestly a shame that this practice was lost to time, I would love to visit such a garden with a smiling Epicurean and a lot of good friends in it!

It wasn't "lost." We know what happened to it. We have the "Triumph" of Christianity to "thank" for it. 😞 I recommend Nixey's book The Darkening Age for that story https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Darkening_Age?wprov=sfla1

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 6:01 AM

Thank you! My reading list gets bigger and bigger, luckily I have holidays right now 😊

Still, I think that Christianity didn't really destroy Epicureanism... well, it did, but it also took some of the things out of this great philosophy and incorporated it into its own world view. The community of friends... yeah, I fear that that's basically it. Everything else was changed drastically. The view of labour, the view on sin and virtue, and especially the teachings on death and the absence of God were removed.

As far as I understand, many Christians like Christianity for the community of like-minded, virtuous and life-enjoying people - exactly what Epicurus was propagating. But I've met far less Christians who like Christianity for the other parts.

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 6:12 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Still, I think that Christianity didn't really destroy Epicureanism... well, it did, but it also took some of the things out of this great philosophy and incorporated it into its own world view. The community of friends...

I can hear [Don](#) thinking "this guy is the reincarnation of Norman deWitt!" Kind of an inside joke but can't resist making it. Smoothkiwi as you read DeWitt's books (specifically including "[St Paul and Epicurus](#)") you will see he is fond - perhaps too fond 😊 of drawing analogies to Christianity. I think many of them are valid, but some of them you'll probably agree are stretched. In general though his points are probably good points of connection for Christian readers.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 7, 2022 at 6:15 AM

Well, I wrote this exactly because I was reading the corresponding section yesterday, and his words simply were stuck in my mind 😂

Post by "Don" of January 7, 2022 at 6:20 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I can hear Don thinking "this guy is the reincarnation of Norman deWitt!" Kind of an inside joke but can't resist making it

I can take a hint 😊 I agree with @smoothiekiwi that and think Christianity did - let's just go ahead and say it - stole and perverted some practices from the Epicureans. I just think DeWitt sees Epicureans hiding around EVERY Christian corner with the barest (or even absence) of evidence and in the process he dilutes his premise to the point of absurdity.

Too harsh? 😊

Post by "Cassius" of January 7, 2022 at 6:23 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I can take a hint

Ha -- no hint intended. You're not being too harsh and i agree with your criticism of DeWitt in that department. Perhaps not all the way to "absurdity" but even for me I think DeWitt's tendency went overboard. But that maybe because I am so committed at this point in life against making too many compromises with Christianity (or Stoicism).

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 7, 2022 at 2:52 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

I would love to visit such a garden with a smiling Epicurean and a lot of good friends in it!

We can each make it happen, where-ever we live!

Or...we all decide to move to one particular city and create one.

Since I live in the U.S., then that is where I would want to set up a Garden.

Everytime I say that I want to start a Epicurean Philosophy Garden, it sounds rather "grandiose"...and yet everything must first start with an idea.

I've decided I want to start one on the East Coast...now I have only to determine the best location...I am open to feedback on that by anyone who reads this.

Post by “Don” of January 7, 2022 at 3:18 PM

I've heard of some Unitarian churches holding Epicurean events or having Epicurean study groups. I can't remember where online I saw that, but I remember being pleasantly surprised.