

Did Epicurus really oversell the power of science to diminish anxiety?

Post by “waterholic” of February 14, 2023 at 1:52 AM

"In the end, though, Epicurus might oversell science's power to diminish anxiety, at least for individuals who find themselves enmeshed in a powerfully anti-science environment" (from "Living for Pleasure: An Epicurean Guide to Life (Guides to the Good Life)" by Emily A. Austin)

I am happy to find a (somewhat) critical argument about Epicurus. He was far from infallible. Some of the ideas about the shape of atoms were simply laughable. But I have a hard time to accept this particular remark.

I assume this is a statement that is hard to generalise, argue or disprove. I can only share my personal experience. It is not that I read something new about the nature of the universe in DRN. It is the structure of argumentation, ethics logically assembled on it and the fact that this knowledge was there for human kind for millenia that did make a difference personally for me. It does help to put permanently to rest the notion that you as an individual are somehow the centre of the universe.

I suppose Epicurus did not claim that science (or rather physics in his understanding) can help **everyone** diminish anxiety, including people who are not open to critical thinking. A minimum requirement should be to study and contemplate. So I am not entirely sure where the overselling comes from.

Post by “Cassius” of February 14, 2023 at 8:44 AM

One aspect of that which I think is important Waterholic is that Epicurean philosophy isn't magic, and you can't just repeat an incantation and automatically be healed or changed in the blink of an eye. Successful results in any procedure can't be guaranteed because the universe is not deterministic or fated, and there are no gods or mechanisms that prevent unexpected events from happening or which can necessarily overturn motions already in place. Many of the people who are shown the benefits of an approach are simply not willing, or sometimes not capable, of following it.

So when discussing whether something is "oversold" it seems to me that a lot of the issue is in the expectations of the person hearing the advice, in that they are looking for things which are

not possible to deliver.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 14, 2023 at 9:40 AM

I am responding without reading the context surrounding that quote, so I apologize if this is not a direct response.

I think that Epicurus' promotion of rational, non-mystical thinking is *most* necessary for those enmeshed in a powerfully anti-science environment. We observed this during the Italian Renaissance and Revolutionary France: the dissonance Lucretius offered *inspired* the founders of modern science and provided a lighthouse in a religious storm.

That observation may seem much *less* poignant to we, contemporary, urban people, enmeshed in a power grid of modernity. Even Christians who "claim" to have adopted the Christianity that Jesus taught still walk around with computers in their pockets that were invented by disbelievers on the principle of particle physics.

In a way, we are all Epicurean, whether or not reactionary minds are willing to recognize their own context. When Nietzsche said "God Is Dead", he didn't mean, "Atheists Have Killed the Sacred Spirit of the Christians", he meant, "Our medieval mythology has dried-up like a drippy puddle in this, the Summer of Science".

The observation that the Sun is not a conscious deity is also a pretty mundane observation for modern peoples, but only because we were already taught this information. If the majority of American adults were still confused about the basic operations of the sun, this observation would prophetic, threatening, inspiring, and life-changing.

Ultimately, though, whether we are introducing Atomism to a culture that sees shades of infinitely divisible elements, or Heliocentrism to a Geocentric culture, or telling a gay kid in rural Mississippi in 2023 that his feelings are totally **natural**, it is people who have been neglected scientifically who benefit *most* from these things.

I guess my thesis is this: Science might seem "oversold" in cultures that are already scientific, but a culture like Afghanistan under the Taliban, for example, **DESPERATELY** needs a Lucretian revolution of thought. Flat-Earthers might not believe in satellites in outer space ... but they sure do use them a lot when they make phone calls.

Post by “waterholic” of February 14, 2023 at 9:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

One aspect of that which I think is important Waterholic is that Epicurean philosophy isn't magic, and you can't just repeat an incantation and automatically be healed or changed in the blink of an eye.

This is exactly my qualm with the paragraph from Emily Austin: the expectation that knowing the philosophy and science will inevitably solve all the problems is not realistic. So to be clear, I disagree with the statement that "Epicurus might oversell science's power to diminish anxiety"

Post by "Cassius" of February 14, 2023 at 10:19 AM

"...In the end, though, Epicurus might oversell" (emphasis added)

Like Nate, I haven't read back to the full context, so take this extra comment with a grain of salt too: But I recall when reading the book thinking that the author was trying to both provide the most aggressive defense of "pleasure" that I have seen from an academic since Norman DeWitt, while still trying to avoid being "lynched."

And so in this case I read that wording as an attempt to be compassionate to those who are (in my view) so out of touch with reality that they think that magic bullets are possible. Probably there are better ways to state my last sentence but I read the "might" as an attempt to soften the blow for those who are in really bad circumstances, rather than a charge against Epicurus.

Post by "waterholic" of February 14, 2023 at 11:44 AM

I agree, of course, "**might**" is not an accidental choice. I guess, I forget that a book is not a forum for a completely open thought sharing.

Post by "Cassius" of February 14, 2023 at 12:08 PM

Especially when the author of the book has a career in Academia and the balancing act that entails.

Probably appropriate to remember Lucian's comment about the Epicurean who challenged Aristotle the Oracle Monger - what business did he have being the only sane man in a roomful of dangerous folks - or something to that effect 😊

That's the kind of line [Joshua](#) can quote off the top of his head at the spur of the moment but I can only paraphrase!

Post by “Little Rocker” of February 15, 2023 at 9:28 AM

Yeah, it sounds like she might be ceding too much ground to the common objection from academic philosophers that if Epicurus thinks we only study science for the sake of achieving the good, then that opens the empirical possibility that false scientific beliefs can be prudent, either because false beliefs more effectively diminish anxiety or make you safer from external threats. Epicurus cares both about diminishing anxiety and protecting himself against external threats, so they object that his commitment to truth is only skin deep.

I myself prefer to think that true belief diminishes anxiety, and I sort of suspect Epicurus might be happy to die rather than recant his science before the world. But I could be wrong--perhaps those beatific faces of the saints really do reflect greater psychological equanimity than I will ever achieve (see [this](#) study, admittedly quite vague, as usual, about 'happiness'), and perhaps Epicurus would recommend turning Galileo under the circumstances. I agree she probably should have argued in Epicurus' defense more forcefully.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 15, 2023 at 11:39 AM

[VS29](#). *Speaking freely in my study of what is natural, I prefer to prophesize about what is good for all people, even if no one will understand me, rather than to accept common opinions and thereby reap the showers of praise that fall so freely from the great mass of men.* Saint-Andre translation

All in all, I'd say she made quite a good presentation in defense of Epicurus.

Post by “waterholic” of February 15, 2023 at 11:53 AM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

Epicurus might be happy to die rather than recant his science before the world.

Curious thought occurred to me: Epicurus might have been politically correct too (this one is a huge "might"). I recalled a poem (the Sisyphus fragment) attributed to Critias (a relation of Plato):

"...Then, when the laws forbade them to commit open crimes of violence, and they began to do them in secret, a wise and clever man invented fear (of the gods) for mortals, that there might be some means of frightening the wicked, even if they do anything or say or think it in secret. Hence, he introduced the Divine, saying that there is a God flourishing with immortal life, hearing and seeing with his mind, and thinking of everything and caring about these things..."

Now assuming someone (not necessarily Epicurus 😊) is keen on undoing the harm of the fear of the Divine, but does not particularly want to put up with the unnecessary discussions whether divine exists or not, he/she might simply state that the Divine exists, but it does not meddle in any way with our lives. This is a form of a logical jujitsu, rendering the religious arguments moot.

But of course, this is just an unprovable theory (though I find it extremely hard to reconcile atomism and Epicurean epistemology with deism - possibly with agnosticism, but it's an entirely different topic).

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2023 at 12:02 PM

It's an interesting question as to when one would become a martyr for one's beliefs. Apparently Socrates thought the answer was clear, but my understanding has always been that he was doing so "for the sake of his country" or something like that. Maybe that's the same thing, but it has never been clear to me why he couldn't have made a more practical analysis of all the costs and benefits, and even if he thought his personal example was so important to the world, just gone somewhere else to continue to make it. Plus I gathered he had all these afterlife considerations.

I am not sure at all what Epicurus would have done if he thought he was about to be hauled up on blasphemy charges. Might he not have simply said "OK, guys, have it your way - I will go

continue my teaching in Samos or Lampsacus or where-ever. You can believe what you want to believe here in Athens - I may die for my friends, but no spot of ground is worth my dying over?"

Post by "Little Rocker" of February 15, 2023 at 12:31 PM

Now that you mention it, I think that Epicurus might move if given the option (didn't Philodemus get kicked out of somewhere for impiety?), but I wonder what he would do if his only options were to recant or die.

Yeah, Socrates claims that he can't expect anyone else to tolerate his company if his own fellow citizens won't, so he refuses to propose exile as his penalty. He also claims that it would be cowardly and hypocritical after he says he would rather die than give up philosophy to give up philosophy to avoid death. He would be a laughingstock. It reminds me a bit of that part in Lucretius where he talks about how lots of people say that plenty of things are worse than death, then they willingly choose those things rather than die. Lucretius is like, 'and yet they live.'

The question about Socrates and the afterlife is super interesting because in Plato's Apology, he considers it equally likely that there could be no afterlife. I think Xenophon's Socrates never says anything about the afterlife. So the Socrates who cares about the afterlife could be colored through Plato's own Pythagorean commitments.

Post by "waterholic" of February 15, 2023 at 12:53 PM

For Epicurus, I assume dying for anything would make sense if the alternative is living with constant pain and no pleasure to compensate. Beyond this, the context of time and place matters. Being exiled in those days meant a likely death. Today one ends up in Paris or Mexico. Friends can be a message away and getting back, if all settles, is easy and safe.

Once you remove the unnatural desires and the concept of virtue, there is precious little worth dying for other than your freinds and family.

Post by "Joshua" of February 15, 2023 at 7:07 PM

We're two days away from the anniversary of Giordano Bruno's death, so the question is a timely one. He was questioned for 7 years, given many opportunities to recant his positions, and remained defiant until the end--when two nails were driven through his lips in the shape of a cross in order to silence him at last.

On the base of his statue in the Campo de Fiori, a plaque reads that the statue itself is the product of "The century predicted by him". Thereby suggesting that he was willing to die because his mind belonged to a future that did not yet exist. In other cases, people have died willingly because their world was now a thing of the past, such as was the case at the end of the Roman Republic. The later pagan poet Palladus gives voice to that pain around the year 391 A.D.

Quote

Is it not true that we are dead, and living only in appearance,

We Hellenes, fallen on disaster,

Likening life to a dream, since we remain alive while

Our way of life is dead and gone?

Palladas, pagan poet, after the destruction of the Serapeon in Alexandria

A monastery and church were built on its ruins.

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2023 at 7:40 PM

My best thought on this subject would be like with everything else, it's a matter of the individual calculating what the future holds and whether he or she would rather die than continue living on in bad circumstances.

I don't really like talking about "psychological hedonism" or saying that everything we decide to do by default means that we think we will gain pleasure by it, but I definitely think that it is within the standard Epicurean calculation to think about what the future holds, even after we are gone, and to calculate the pleasure we would receive for the rest of our shortened lives by knowing that our death would "send a message" to later generations to pursue the same path. In most cases I doubt that would really make sense, but if we are going to be consistent that the universe has no absolute standards and that the individual is the only one who can make the call as to their own life, then I can certainly see that the "glory" that would come from

standing up to the crowd would make it worthwhile to that person. So in that sense like in others I don't think that "glory" is necessarily a Stoic contention, any more than we would think about the appreciation of our children after we are gone if we were to do something that caused us to lose our lives for their sake.

In my own situation I really can't see why "moving" wouldn't be the better choice in most every situation, but I see as I get older how that gets harder and harder, and indeed if we are sure that we don't need to run the clock out to the very last second, then that does give us a certain strength of mind and spirit to spit in the face of our enemies and say "bring it on." Sometimes what even does kill us makes "us" stronger depending on what we take pleasure in.

I think the word "nicely" in this Vatican Saying destroys the sense and a better word (at the very least "well") is needed, but I think this conveys the spirit:

VS47. I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and I have closed off every one of your devious entrances. And we will not give ourselves up as captives, to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who cling to it maundering, we will leave from life singing aloud a glorious triumph-song on how nicely we lived.

As usual I think it's a bad idea to try to come up with a one size fits all rule. I haven't made this comment in the "frugal hedonism" thread, because I see the value in explaining words. But in the end I think the best way to convey this analysis is simply to call it "Epicurean" - and gradually begin the long crawl out of the box that we are in due to the dominance (and our acceptance) of other people's paradigms.

Post by "Don" of February 15, 2023 at 11:08 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

(didn't Philodemus get kicked out of somewhere for impiety?)

Were you thinking of Epicurus maybe?

"Epicurus's teachings caused strife in Mytilene and he was forced to leave." (Wikipedia)

DeWitt pieces together an intriguing piece of historical fiction to flesh out Epicurus's experience and expulsion from Mytilene.

Post by "Don" of February 15, 2023 at 11:34 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't really like talking about "psychological hedonism" or saying that everything we decide to do by default means that we think we will gain pleasure by it...

I think "psychological (or motivational) hedonism" is one of the better ways to describe Epicurus's philosophy to put it into a larger context.

[Quote from Excerpt from Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

Motivational Hedonism (more commonly referred to by the less descriptive label, "Psychological Hedonism") is the theory that the desires to encounter pleasure and to avoid pain guide all of our behavior. Most accounts of Motivational Hedonism include both conscious and unconscious desires for pleasure, but emphasize the latter. Epicurus, William James, Sigmund Freud, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and (on one interpretation) even Charles Darwin have all argued for varieties of Motivational Hedonism. Bentham used the idea to support his theory of Hedonistic Utilitarianism (discussed below). Weak versions of Motivational Hedonism hold that the desires to seek pleasure and avoid pain often or always have some influence on our behavior. Weak versions are generally considered to be uncontroversially true and not especially useful for philosophy.

I find that last sentence somewhat amusing because it seems to echo exactly what "Torquatus" says:

[Quote from "Torquatus"](#)

Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them.

Seems useful for Epicurean philosophy.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

everything we decide to do by default means that we think we will gain pleasure by it

I just want to mention that from my perspective, we don't even need to "think we will gain pleasure by it." We just will, whether consciously or unconsciously, we will seek pleasure and

avoid pain by virtue of being living breathing natural organisms... like every other natural organism with at least some agency.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I definitely think that it is within the standard Epicurean calculation to think about what the future holds, even after we are gone, and to calculate the pleasure we would receive for the rest of our shortened lives by knowing that our death would "send a message" to later generations to pursue the same path.

That statement seems uncontroversial enough. That's the reason, from my perspective, that Epicurus made his will. The *anticipation* of having his wishes fulfilled - even though he *knew* he wouldn't be around to see their fruition - gave him pleasure.

Bailey does use "well" in VS47. Bailey also attributes it to Metrodorus, and St.-Andre doesn't even include it in his list of the Vatican Sayings:

XLVII. I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and entrenched myself against all thy secret attacks. And we will not give ourselves up as captives to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who here vainly cling to it, we will leave life crying aloud in a glorious triumph-song that we have lived well.

And the word used is καλοῦ "well, beautifully, ..." and 24 other different meanings!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As usual I think it's a bad idea to try to come up with a one size fits all rule. I haven't made this comment in the "frugal hedonism" thread, because I see the value in explaining words. But in the end I think the best way to convey this analysis is simply to call it "Epicurean" - and gradually begin the long crawl out of the box that we are in due to the dominance (and our acceptance) of other people's paradigms.

I would agree it's a "bad idea to try to come up with a one size fits all rule" in the case of dying for your beliefs or for any other reason. Those are ALL situations that are going to have entirely different contexts and mitigating circumstances, etc. My question though is "What do you mean by 'Epicurean'?" What does that word convey that the other words don't?

I'm going to make a similar post in the "frugal hedonism" thread and refer back here. This may even need a thread of its own.

Post by "Don" of February 16, 2023 at 7:56 AM

btw, I think [Cassius](#) and I have a variation on this "one size fits all" discussion at least once a year. In fact, here's one variation from 2021:

Post

[RE: Welcome Philia!](#)

Apologies to @Philia ...

At the risk of bogging down this Welcome thread (Feel free to branch this off, @Cassius) , I think @Cassius and I have slightly different views on this topic. Not opposed, necessarily, but different emphases starting with different interpretations of [PD10](#) .

I completely agree that Epicurus did not dictate or mandate THE Way to Live. No commandments, no mandatory sacrifices, no divinely-inspired edicts, etc.

However, on the other hand, I think that Epicurus...



Don

August 7, 2021 at 11:23 PM

It's usually in relation to [PD10](#) or the "profligate" section of the letter to Menoikeus, but it seems to be an annual event. 😊

In the end, we never seem to be diametrically opposed, but I think it's an important discussion to revisit time to time. I thought it might be helpful to put my current comments into that larger context.

Post by “Cassius” of February 16, 2023 at 9:57 AM

Yes good point Don. I really don't think we are very much apart on any of this. If I had to summarize why we frequently put different spins on things it is because I think it is interesting to find ways to push the envelope on discussions, and there are almost always going to be multiple ways to do that.

If someone asks me to go into detail about what Epicurus taught I would almost certainly say that he thought generally being frugal is a good idea, and I would say that the Greek word for pleasure is hedone and technicians like to call that "hedonism." Same effect could be gained by calling it "Voluptatism" but that's not in use even in the technical camps



My general pushback not at you but at the world is that I think it is a big problem to try to force Epicurus into boxes recognizable in modern ordinary terms, when I think the core points and thus implications of the philosophy go far beyond modern ordinary terms.

So I am fine with using frugality and hedonism in proper contexts, but I sense that the contexts in which words like "hedonism" are understandable are not really the audience that I personally am most concerned about. If someone is comfortable talking about "hedonism" then odds are (not always!) but I would have to guesstimate that such a person is probably philosophically aware already and probably has already accumulated an eclectic sum that will keep Epicurus in that box in their minds, and they will move on to something else. Most of what I personally would like to be doing isn't targeted at people like that, but at developing a way to express how fundamentally deep and outside-the-box Epicurus really was.

There are lots of directions to go and people to talk to so it's all good and mainly dependent on context.

And remember, you're talking to someone who's here largely because he was roped in by DeWitt's "[Philosophy for the Millions](#)." 😊

Post by “Little Rocker” of February 16, 2023 at 2:11 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Were you thinking of Epicurus maybe?

"Epicurus's teachings caused strife in Mytilene and he was forced to leave." (Wikipedia)

DeWitt pieces together an intriguing piece of historical fiction to flesh out Epicurus's experience and expulsion from Mytilene.

Found it:

One source has a certain Philodemus driven from the Sicilian town of Himera when his teachings were thought to have incurred divine wrath in the form of an epidemic (Aelian, in *Suda*, s.vv. *Himeraiai*, *sukophantein*, and *timôntai*; cf. Sider 1997, 9–10). The reconstruction of the testimonium is somewhat difficult, and nothing says that it must have to do with our Philodemus. Still, it would not be unusual for an Epicurean to be accused of atheism, and new readings in Philodemus' *Index Academicorum* (cf. Fleischer 2017b) show that he did indeed spend time in Sicily. (From [Blank](#), SEP)