

Fundamental Issues In Hedonism

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 8:18 AM

When pursuing a search example posed by Cassius I came across this: "Epicurus believed that the ultimate aim of a happy life is 'freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind'". I don't know if this is a quote from this site or from elsewhere.

However, it raises the question: is the "ultimate aim" a happy life or a relevant, contributing life? The former seems so narcissistic.

Thoughts, perspectives? (Or, have you already talked that into the ground?)

Post by “Don” of December 10, 2023 at 8:40 AM

From my perspective, "happy life or a relevant, contributing life" is a false dichotomy. For one reason, self-care is of vital importance to truly be contributing. Burning oneself out on "contributing" does no one any good.

And "relevant" to whom? "Contributing" to what?

An important perspective on this, from my view, is Principle Doctrine 5:

It is not possible to live a pleasurable life without the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice; and it is impossible to live with wisdom, morality, and justice without living pleurably. When one of these is lacking, it is impossible to live a pleasurable life.

Post by “Don” of December 10, 2023 at 11:05 AM

Quote

Thoughts, perspectives? (Or, have you already talked that into the ground?)

Honestly, there's no topic that has been exhausted or talked into the ground. Each time a topic comes up, it provides the opportunity for fresh perspectives, honing one's arguments, and

wrestling with interesting and challenging questions. Thanks for raising the topic!

Post by “Godfrey” of December 10, 2023 at 11:30 AM

This gets to the heart of the ethical hedonism.

First, per [PD03](#), freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the mind is the same thing as maximum pleasure.

Next, pleasure is the goal to which all things point. So by this reasoning, a relevant, contributing life is worth pursuing because it is pleasurable. Many studies point out that a relevant, contributing life increases well-being: what is well-being, if not pleasure?

To me, if you begin with the goal of being relevant and contributing (to whatever you might find relevant), then you're pursuing duty ethics. From my experience this eventually leads to burnout and poor health. Keeping pleasure as a guide, I can actually contribute more and be more relevant. To me, this is a valuable insight of Epicurus', although it's extremely controversial to this day.

In my own life, experimenting with becoming more aware of my feelings of pleasure and pain, and using them as a guide, has been a game changer. Combining this with an understanding of Epicurus' categories of desires provides a powerful set of tools for living a fulfilling life.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 11:35 AM

Yes, Don, you are right for sure. Absolute polarization doesn't work.

Mostly I was reflecting on the issue of "a happy life". I believe Epicureanism has been challenged as advocating hedonism. And, the focus of "a happy life" may then leave us wondering if that is the best "yardstick". You all are far more educated on Epicurean philosophy than I am. And, I was wondering if, particularly in this era of the planet, we can really say that searching for "a happy life" is going to save us all from the ecological and technological dilemmas we are creating. Just an opportunity for discussion, if it seems interesting.

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 11:44 AM

Thanks Godfrey. Yes, well stated. Indeed, this is a discussion and not a resolution. In addition to boards in neurology I also have boards in addiction. And, addiction is a great place to study what makes us happy and what doesn't (and how we get to either situation). And, as you say, knowing the drivers of our happiness (and/or unhappiness) are very important to finding....ummmm...happiness! My wife is a clinical mental health counselor (and academic) and we talk a lot about the paths to satisfaction, happiness, and life balance (particularly how to rebuild these when they are lost).

All very interesting stuff! Again, engaging with you all is a lot of fun.

Post by “Don” of December 10, 2023 at 11:48 AM

"If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Post by “BrainToBeing” of December 10, 2023 at 4:11 PM

Indeed. We just watched the extended version of the Rings trilogy again. Tolkien was amazing in framing the themes, characters, and interplay of that story. Certainly it reigns as my favorite fiction of all time. How brilliant that the only one who could be the ring-bearer was someone who didn't care about power or gold, and could give it away. Yet, Tolkien recognized that enough exposure to "the power" could corrode even Frodo. One of my favorite scenes (relevant to the exploits of this lofty group) is the one at the end, in the pub where the hobbits were just part of the crowd, accorded no recognition for saving the world. Leave it to Tolkien to ensure that scene was written and recognized.

Post by “Cassius” of December 10, 2023 at 5:46 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

And, I was wondering if, particularly in this era of the planet, we can really say that searching for "a happy life" is going to save us all from the ecological and technological dilemmas we are creating.

Somehow I missed this part of the discussion earlier today so that's why I didn't comment already. Godfrey and Don answered it well but this sentence gives an opportunity to point out that most of us would probably say that saving ourselves and future generations would indeed be a major concern in looking to live a happy life -- unless we like the idea of living on a polluted and ecologically devastated planet! 😊 No doubt there are some contrarians who would say that they wouldn't care about that, but that's the kind of attitude that simply refuses to see that virtue is not its own reward, and that we want out of life is the broad kind of "good feeling" that ultimately resolves to falling under the term "pleasure."

Post by “Godfrey” of December 10, 2023 at 5:56 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

And, I was wondering if, particularly in this era of the planet, we can really say that searching for "a happy life" is going to save us all from the ecological and technological dilemmas we are creating.

In Epicurean terms, pleasure and pain are our guides. When the present or future conditions of, say, the planet or society are dismal, that's a source of pain to many of us as individuals. It's critical to remember that searching for a happy life involves paying attention to *both* our pleasure *and* pain, since they both are our guides. Over time, it often becomes evident that ignoring or suppressing our pain (such as distress over the state of the world) doesn't lead to more pleasure, and that we need to do the work to deal with the pain. In this case pain becomes a guide to living a happy life.

Also central to Epicurus' ethics are three categories of desire. One place to find these is in the Principle Doctrines, particularly [PD29-30](#), [PD15](#), and [PD26](#). These categories are natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and unnatural. These perhaps could be considered more specific guides to what is prudent to pursue, and can help us to sort out actions that we might take to remove particular pains. I think most Epicureans would say (well, at least I would) that if more people were aware of and followed this ethical system, society and the planet might not be in the situation that they're in.

Epicurean ethics is really quite interesting, but it takes a lot of work to really dig into it and get full benefit from it. However there's much pleasure to be had from doing this work!

Post by “Don” of December 10, 2023 at 10:30 PM

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

Mostly I was reflecting on the issue of "a happy life".

It's a great question, and, in many ways, comes down to "How do you define the word 'happy'?" The word translated as English "happy" in most ancient texts is eudaimonia. I like to translate that as "well-being" instead of "happy." Well-being is kind of a play on the word components of eu-daimonia, but that's into the weeds. "Happy" carries so much semantic baggage in English it can get in the way.

[Quote from BrainToBeing](#)

I believe Epicureanism has been challenged as advocating hedonism.

We have discussions on here all the time about Epicurus's "hedonism." Hedonism gets hung with "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" often, but it seems there are different brands. I believe Emily Austin describes Epicurus's philosophy as [psychological hedonism](#), "the view that the ultimate motive for all voluntary human action is the desire to experience pleasure or to avoid pain. Immediate gratification can be sacrificed for a chance of greater, future pleasure."

Post by “Pacatus” of December 11, 2023 at 6:02 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

"Happy" carries so much semantic baggage in English it can get in the way.

Whilst I agree about the semantic difficulties with the word “happy/happiness,” I think that eudaimonia cannot be a strictly objective state – such that, say, you might claim that Pacatus is clearly in a state of eudaimonia/well-being, even though Pacatus might not be aware of that at all. So, I think there has to be a subjective element – such that I **feel** that state of well-being,

which is a feeling of pleasure/pleasantness. And, semantic difficulties aside, I know when I **feel** happy, just as I know when I'm feeling enjoyment or contentment – they are all useful words in conventional discourse (where we don't need to parse things so precisely, which itself might be off-putting to someone not steeped in the "academic" discourse). So, I use the phrase "happy well-being" for myself.

NOTE: I had a philosopher friend, who did his dissertation on the Nicomachean Ethics, who insisted the best rendering of eudaimonia was "flourishing" -- but that strikes me as even more problematic than "happy."

Post by “Don” of December 12, 2023 at 10:55 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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Fully agree. "Flourishing" seems ... wrong? Merriam-Webster defines "flourishing" as "marked by vigorous and healthy growth; very active and successful."

Your "happy well-being" is better, for sure. I lean more in the direction of "satisfied well-being" or "contented well-being." To be even more literal, I might suggest "to be in good spirits," but that might be taking the linguistic pun too far.

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 13, 2023 at 2:12 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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It was impressed upon me (*by Peripatetics*) in college that "*flourishing*" was the *only* acceptable definition of εὐδαιμονία. One of the professors of the department described Aristotle as "the smartest person who ever lived." The department head was particularly fond of Alasdair MacIntyre and assigned us his writings.

I tend to take the word as meaning "*good-spirited-ness*", in which case, "*happiness*" is a reasonable translation.

Post by "Don" of December 13, 2023 at 2:43 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

It was impressed upon me (by Peripatetics) in college that "flourishing" was the only acceptable definition of εὐδαιμονία. One of the professors of the department described Aristotle as "the smartest person who ever lived."



I'll gladly give Aristotle his due up to a point, but "the smartest person who ever lived." LOL! I think he was more clever than smart, and too clever by half from what I've read.

FYI for anyone interested: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alasdair_MacIntyre?wprov=sfla1

Post by "Kalosyni" of December 14, 2023 at 9:52 AM

Just found this article and wanted to post it (not sure if this is already on the forum) ...haven't fully read it yet but seems relevant to this thread discussion:

[A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being](#)