

Looking for constructive feedback on my mostly Epicurean philosophy of life

Post by “philosofer123” of September 13, 2024 at 7:08 PM

It is my guide to living well.

You may find a brief summary and a link to the full document here:
<http://philosofer123.wordpress.com>

Post by “Cassius” of September 13, 2024 at 7:36 PM

A lot of work in that document, thanks for sharing it.

Like you express, it's not at all fully consistent with Epicurus (and I am not just referring to the tranquility part, but to the deterministic aspects and other aspects as well.).

But there is certainly some overlap, and you've put a lot of work into it. I can see that such an exercise would be helpful to anyone.

Hopefully you will get some constructive comments so again thanks for posting.

Post by “philosofer123” of September 13, 2024 at 7:42 PM

Thank you for taking a look, Cassius.

I agree that most anyone would benefit from such an exercise. However, I have not been able to find any contemporary documents like my own--guides to living well that contain a metaphysics, an ethics and a set of practices, all supported by philosophical arguments. Are you aware of any?

Post by “Cassius” of September 13, 2024 at 10:09 PM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4044-looking-for-constructive-feedback-on-my-mostly-epicurean-philosophy-of-life/>

None come to mind at the moment, but I bet there are a significant number of people who've done something like that. If I come across any I'll definitely let you know.

It's probably pretty obvious to you already that you disagree with Epicurus on determinism (or at least that's the way I read your outline). The issues on that subject are pretty well formulated so you've no doubt thought that through.

However as to the focus you place on "tranquility" rather than pleasure, that's a subject where a lot may remain to be explored. I think I see that you've had an account here for a number of years so you're probably aware of our discussions on that. Discussions on determinism don't usually lead to much changing of minds, but I think there's a lot of little-discussed possibilities in going through the Epicurean texts on the meaning of pleasure vs tranquility, so it might be interesting for you or others in this thread to discuss your variation on the tranquility theme.

The "atheism" and "afterlife nihilism" points are pretty close to Epicurus, and you probably know how your take differs from Epicurus on "the gods."

Your next point is what I interpret as the "determinism" point...

Then comes "moral nihilism," and while I think that the end result might ultimately be not so far off from what I think Epicurus would say, I doubt he would embrace the tone of "nothing is "good" or "bad" or "right" or "wrong" or "just" or "unjust" or "moral" or "immoral." It seems pretty clear to me that Epicurus himself *was* comfortable in using those terms, but he defined them all in terms of pleasure and pain.

Fear of death being irrational seems very close to Epicurus.

And then the final element is what i am characterizing as your "tranquility" focus, which you have under the name of "negative hedonism." Of course that's where I don't think Epicurus would agree there either, as the Epicureans specifically identified "pleasure" as the goal, and that takes you back into the issues of what "pleasure" really means. I'm firmly convinced that that was a very deliberate decision, and that "pleasure" is the broader term, including every aspect of tranquility, while "tranquility" is only one of many aspects of "pleasure."

But the bottom line is as i said - I think anyone who works out their philosophy which as much detail as you have done is far ahead of most everyone else, so again I compliment you on the document.

Post by “philosofer123” of September 13, 2024 at 10:20 PM

Cassius, thank you for the thoughtful critique.

Please note that the argument in the document for ultimate responsibility impossibilism does not require determinism. That is, the argument works regardless of whether determinism is true, and I am agnostic on whether determinism is true. Also, I believe that ultimate responsibility impossibilism strongly promotes peace of mind, as discussed on page 6.

Regarding the Epicurean take on negative hedonism, how do you think Epicurus would respond to my argument for negative hedonism on pages 4 to 6?

Post by “Joshua” of September 13, 2024 at 11:32 PM

Quote

There is no reliable scientific evidence of consciousness after brain death. At the same time, there is plenty of scientific evidence that all aspects of consciousness (sense impressions, emotions, thoughts, memories, etc.) depend completely upon a live and functioning brain, and that different aspects of consciousness depend upon different neural structures within the brain. Furthermore, general anesthesia or a sharp blow to the head can temporarily extinguish consciousness via their effects on the brain. These facts strongly support the claim that consciousness ends with brain death.

I would consider shoring this up with the observation that there is a relationship between progressive brain damage and progressive cognitive decline, and that that relationship is, to all appearances, a causal one.

I'll also add that I have a residual distaste for my former practice of mindfulness meditation; I hold on to this distaste on the grounds that *escaping* the present moment is, after all, the primary function of the imagination. This was especially useful to me during those long pointless hours sitting (as well as standing and kneeling) in a church pew. Looking back now on the boy in the pew, I cannot honestly say that I would wish him to be mentally present for all of that seemingly endless tedium.

Post by “philosofer123” of September 14, 2024 at 4:47 PM

Joshua, thank you for reading and making suggestions.

I do not meditate regularly, despite recommending meditation several times in my document. It is the most significant piece of advice in the document that I have not yet implemented.

Post by “kochiekoch” of September 16, 2024 at 2:23 PM

Hi there! It's been a long time. 😊

I think I might have encountered you and your document on Vincent Cook's e-mail list years ago.

I have it in my favorites and check in now and then to see if you have any updates.

Like Cassius, I notice your document does diverge from Epicureanism in some respects, but overall, a good and thought provoking read. ("Death is harmful to one who dies"). Huh?

I notice I can't access it on Scrib anymore unless I sign up, which I'm not going to do. 😄 Oh well I got your Wordpress address.

Post by “philosofer123” of September 17, 2024 at 5:27 PM

Hi Kochiekoch! Thank you for your comment. I am glad that you like my document.

Yes, my view on the harmfulness of death does indeed diverge from the Epicurean view. That said, I believe that the particular types of harm caused by one's death are nothing to fear, for reasons discussed on page 4.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any additional feedback or questions.

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 18, 2024 at 8:49 AM

Right off the bat, I appreciate that you describe your outline as a philosophical exercise. As far as our sense of Epicurean spirituality goes, writing an outline is a key practice.

Epicurus would agree with your theological rejection of supernatural deities; *however*, he positively affirms that *natural* deities **do** exist (though, those deities are simply inspiring mental objects). Now, if our definition of theism identifies the divine as being responsible for creation, for maintaining natural forces, and for interfering with the development of human history, then Epicurus could reasonably be called an "atheist". However, Epicurus wrote against the atheism of his time, and positively recommends to his pupils that they consider the divine nature to be blessed and imperishable (though the spiritual objects of the masses are incoherent).

I absolutely identify with your position on theology. But I think that the way Epicurus discussed religion was less in terms of abstract metaphysics, and more in terms of cultural anthropology. In which case, "god-belief" is just a natural, human practice, like wolves howling at the moon. Certainly, the moon will never respond to howling: *but that's not why wolves howl*.

Your discussion of one's own death is very much so Epicurean in approach. Epicurus describes death as ΑΝΑΙΣΘΗΤΕΙ from from ἀν- (*án-*, "without") + αἰσθητός (*aisthetós*, "perceptibility", "sensitivity") meaning "**devoid of sensation**", "unconsciousness", "no sense-experience", "absence of sensation", "lacks awareness", "no feeling", "no perception". Contextualizing death as the absence of sensation is exactly how Epicurus saw it. I think the only discrepancy here is that Epicurus did not associate the decision-making faculty of the mind with the prefrontal cortex in a human skull.

I can see why you would both propose both physical determinism and moral nihilism: if one supposes that *freedom*, *choice*, and *responsibility* are illusions, then one would have to admit that we lack any kind of moral agency. Democritus would sympathize with you here, **but not Epicurus**. Epicurus rejects determinism, not only because it violates his principle of particles' unpredictable swerving, but also in an ethical sense, because the belief in determinism can be measurably paralyzing and unhealthy. Even if most of our thoughts and actions are just dominoes in a line of falling particles, the belief in determinism just surrenders whatever small bit of control we do have over our imaginations, even if its only memorizing data, or intentionally daydreaming.

As far as the moral nihilism goes, we treat this proposition with suspicion because, overwhelmingly, pleasure can be equated with physical health. Most things that are physically healthy are inherently pleasurable, whereas physically destructive behaviors tend to be painful. Since Epicurus identifies pleasure with The Good and pain with that which is terrible, and since the feelings of pleasure and pain come from Nature, we reason that good and evil are grounded in nature. Nature compels us to pursue pleasure (to be healthy), and we suffer when we reject these natural compulsions. There may not be an absolute *Ten Commandments* to which all human beings are held, but there are natural, behavioral tendencies that reinforce an organism's ability to thrive.

Overall, your perspective on fear of death aligns with Epicurean philosophy insofar as recognizing it as being an irrational source of anxiety. He might question your proposition that death is harmful; surely, *dying* is harmful, but once *the process of dying* has finished, and death is the case, there is neither pleasure nor pain, good nor evil, because those things require consciousness. Still, the general, thanatological position that fear of death is unhealthy and irrational is on point.

I appreciate your list of ways in which to pursue a better life. Epicurus proposed a number of conclusions at which you have arrived. I think the biggest thing I see as being (in my humble opinion) a contradiction, is the tension between "responsibility impossibilism", "moral nihilism" and your thoughtful list of helpful habits. I maintain, from an Epicurean position, that the fact that we are concerned with ethics in the first place, that we hold ourselves responsible for choice and avoidance, and that we pursue education are evidence that we have at least a little bit of control, and that the choices that we make are subject to our own moral evaluation.

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2024 at 9:28 AM

Outstanding post Nate thank you. Very well worded on a whole series of key points on religion and morality and death.

I don't necessarily want to derail *this* thread with another discussion with fine points on "the gods," but is it your view at this point that you do not think Epicurus held the gods to have any physical existence whatsoever ("*...though, those deities are simply inspiring mental objects*") or am I misreading your intent there?

Not sure how we could work it, but maybe we need a "My Current Thoughts On ____" section of the forum or in our user profiles to have a way to keep track of evolving thoughts. But that's another topic too. Maybe someone will have a suggestion on how we could implement such a thing. I know my own opinions on difficult topics is subject to change so that might be helpful. The other alternative that we already follow to avoid thread derailment is that if a series of posts goes too far off from the main point, we move those to a new thread. So your choice as to whether to respond on that point here, somewhere else, or not at all.

But back on topic and my main point here is - that was an excellent post!

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 18, 2024 at 12:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I shouldn't say "*simply*" because our discussions have revealed that the topic of Epicurean theology is anything but *simple*. Perhaps "*primarily*", "*most immediately*", or "*at least*" would be better. *At least*, I consider the "divine nature" to be a mental construct that provides humans with ethical utility. Therein, one's "god" is, and the collection of human "gods" are, *at least*, personal expressions of the common notion of divinity that almost all human beings seem to share.

Do these conceptions of divinity correspond with non-terrestrial, quasi-animals that dwell in the void between world systems, whose non-compound bodies respire with quasi-blood? *Perhaps*. But even if a human being could triangulate the position of a god in space, by definition, the god would be too well hidden or protected or discrete to allow itself to be discovered, or examined like a specimen. So, those gods, as "*extraordinary extra-terrestrials*", are somewhat theoretical.

Indeed, Epicureans spent a lot of time contemplating the various ways in which the universe could contain a being that is both "alive" yet "immortal". The Kathegemones dedicated treatises to the topic, so I hesitate to dismiss it solely on the argument that: (1) compounds cannot be immortal, (2) all living beings are compounds, (3) "the gods" are living beings, (4) "the gods" cannot be immortal. Ancient Epicureans seemed to have had a lot more to say about *this* than *just that*.

I'm not sure exactly how to deal with that. I wish we had more extant texts.

But the icons in ancient peoples' dreams that some have called "gods", are, *at least*, immediate, concrete, reproducible, inspiring, and we can discuss them in meaningful ways with sensuous vocabulary. The thought of a divine being stimulates a positive mental response the same way that a massage stimulates positive sensations in one's nerves. We observe this sort of internal stimulation in people across the world, and we have been making this observation since before written history. If we want to meaningfully discuss "the gods", we can, *at least*, start there.

Post by “philosofer123” of September 19, 2024 at 7:55 PM

Eikadistes, thank you so much for your detailed, thoughtful post!

Regarding ultimate responsibility impossibilism, one can have proximate control without ultimate control. That is, one can choose to follow the advice in the latter part of my document while understanding that one's choice can be fully expressed as a function of factors (such as one's genes and upbringing) that are entirely outside of one's control.

Regarding moral nihilism, following the advice in the latter part of my document does not require the existence of moral facts. In fact, such advice is based on one's desires and interests, whereas moral facts, if they existed, would be independent of one's desires and interests.