

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Pivot" of January 9, 2019 at 6:20 AM

Hi friends, I would love to hear your input on this subject.

Epicureanism, although best described as a school of thought rather than a code of conduct, has definite ethical implications. In asking, "what ought I do," the Epicurean might advise "that which contributes most to your happiness." All ethical theories have an underlying value structure. Hedonism and utilitarianism value happiness as the sole good, although their theories differ considerably in how that happiness ought be distributed.

Epicureanism also values happiness/pleasure as the sole good. It is the ultimate good by which all other goods claim their worth. Here is the counter-intuitive part: in striving solely for happiness, do we end up falling short of the goal?

A foolish Epicurean might engage in illicit behavior, for example, injecting heroin, as that action elevates his happiness to extreme heights. But this is unsustainable and results in less happiness in the long-run. A sophisticated Epicurean, then, would recognize that he must often times seek happiness in a more roundabout way - indeed, even through suffering.

There is no problem with this so far. But what if, in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate goal, we end up not truly achieving it? If we are to prioritize happiness over all else, then everything else becomes a means to an end. Our relationships, our loved ones, our talents, careers, and projects, are only valuable in their ultimate ability to bring us happiness to us. Is this the right way to view them? I understand that this is a *fact* if happiness should be seen as the ultimate good. I believe it should be. But in viewing all of these aspects of life as a means to an end, do we lose a certain connection with them that is only possible if they are viewed as ends in themselves?

Let me try to make this less abstract of a discussion. Pretend, for example, that I am a man with a wife, two kids, and a horrible job. I work because I need to provide for my family. But I am miserable all the time, as I work most of my days and only come home to watch TV for an hour and sleep. If I am only tending to a family and job as a means to an ultimate end - my own happiness - should I not simply quit my job and leave my family, move to Costa Rica with my savings, and live a relaxing life on the beach? Surely friends are integral for happiness, but it would be easy to make new friends. If I have no moral integrity nor empathy, my knowledge of the immense pain I must have brought my family would not even bother me. Maybe I am a more *effective* Epicurean for lacking this moral character altogether. Let's assume I am snide

enough to hide my nature.

I have found in my own life that if I conduct my life in a manner that I can be proud of (ie, with strong moral principles), then generally I find my relationships improve. There are certain sacrifices that must be made that are irrational in a framework of happiness as one's only true goal. These sacrifices may not immediately appear to eventually increase one's own net happiness, but in fact do. Sometimes certain sacrifices and struggles appear to lead only to more sacrifice and struggle, rather than to happiness. A sophisticated Epicurean may very well abandon these toils for the path that visibly leads to happiness. But what if, at the end of the tunnel, the light that exposed itself is dimmer than the light that hid in the darkness?

I have arrived personally at this conclusion: to truly achieve happiness, I should live by virtue ethics and become the best person I can be. Become a virtuous person - honest, resilient, tempered, loyal - and a happy life will follow. It seems happiness is most attracted to the good man, rather than the man who is not willing to do things which have an obscured connection to happiness. This is just my opinion that I have arrived at through personal experience.

So - the decision procedure for action: virtue ethics. The sole good, and the truth about our existence: Epicureanism. I have always noticed a huge amount of interplay between Stoicism and Epicureanism despite their differences and fights.

What do you all think? Are certain toils impossible to rationally engage under an Epicurean framework? Does moral character allow for more happiness, or does it restrict happiness? 😊
Looking forward to your input.

Post by “Hiram” of January 9, 2019 at 9:54 AM

Choices and avoidances are done according to hedonic calculus as explained in the middle portion of the Epistle to Menoeceus. I recommend that you read this:

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2018/05/20/hap...ics-the-ethics/>

Another source: [Principal Doctrine 5](#) says a life of pleasure must be lived honorably, justly, and wisely. These are precise words. Virtue is not used here, likely because this word is not precise. And we know justice is based on **mutual advantage**, so the matter of divorcing one's spouse and moving to Costa Rica, if it is mutually advantageous for both, then the contract that binds them should be rewritten or abolished. If it isn't, then dialogue among the two contracted parties is needed. If you read the last ten [Principal Doctrines](#) you'll be better acquainted with Epicurean concepts of justice, and remember: a pleasant life is just, therefore relationships should be based on MUTUAL advantage (not the advantage of only one party, which is

predatory, unfair, and would produce a miserable life).

On the choice and avoidance problem you present: Norman DeWitt said "an unplanned life is not worth living".

If your job AND your family make you miserable, then maybe a new job and a divorce can be planned diligently. But the question of leaving your family would require hedonic calculus. Are they sociopaths, or are they a danger to your safety? Is your wife doing something illegal that may get you into trouble? If so, this might pass hedonic calculus. Otherwise, probably not.

On whether relationships are means or ends, this is a frequent accusation. The ancient Epicureans observed that initially ALL friendships emerge naturally from mutual advantage, but later the relationship become strong and a friend may even give his life for a friend. This is a natural process.

Post by "Cassius" of January 9, 2019 at 10:56 AM

Pivot I agree with Hiram's post but would add this. If indeed your calculation of how to pursue happiness ends up not achieving happiness, then you have by definition miscalculated your means. And by concluding that there are a certain set of tools that should be pursued in themselves, rather than with your eye on the goal, then you are again making the classic mistake of putting means before the end, guaranteeing that you will in fact miss the mark (since the mark is not your goal).

It sounds like you have probably read the extended discussion of this topic [under the name of Torquatus in "On Ends"](#) or [at Epicurus.net](#) but if you have not that is one of the best explanations of this issue.

The essential point is that there is really no contradiction in the Epicurean procedure. Happy living is pleasurable living - the dominance of pleasure over pain over the course of a lifetime. And that includes all kinds of pleasure, both physical and mental -- every kind you can think of, including the pleasures of the relationships you are talking about. If you walk away from your relationships to pursue short-term hedonism, then you will be plagued with the regrets and emotional pains of the consequences of your action for the rest of your life. Epicurus also indicates that for example if you betray a friend your life will be thrown into such disarray at times you should give up your own life for that of a friend.

So I think an Epicurean would respond to your analysis by affirming two points: (1) that Epicurus was very clear that we are talking about long term net pain over time - not the pleasures of the moment, and (2) that Epicurus was also very clear that pleasure means ALL

KINDS of pleasure, including mental/emotional pleasures of all kinds, and that indeed mental / emotional pleasures can often be more intense and of greater concern than physical pleasures.

So your conclusion that "virtue ethics" are of use to you in attaining happiness does not contradict Epicurus at all, as you would already suspect due to PD5 "It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life."

But if you ever make the mistake of forgetting that virtue ethics are a means to the greater end of pleasure, and not an end in themselves, then you are setting yourself up for disappointment by "freezing in" intermediate tools that may work at one moment, but be disastrous at the next moment. And it is inevitable that no tool is ALWAYS going to work, because there is no "fate," no "god-given laws" that apply at all times and places and to all people.

And all this is why we quote [Diogenes Laertius' formulation](#) so often:

"If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point."

Please follow up with us on your thoughts in response to these points because this is one of the most important aspects of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Pivot" of January 9, 2019 at 10:57 AM

Very interesting thoughts Hiram. Thank you for correcting my view of Epicurean ethics - PD5 shows the necessity for justice in the decision procedure, as you pointed out. Some problems are still there though as I see it.

PD5 is a bit difficult to believe. It is likely there are sociopaths or others who go through life incredibly unjustly, but who are cunning enough to escape detection without worry. At the very least there are certainly isolated incidents where an opportunity to act unjustly for pleasure presents itself to an individual. Imagine finding a wallet with thousands of dollars in it in a dark alley - is it unjust to steal it as opposed to returning it to the owner?

Looking at the PDs, justice is "...something found mutually beneficial in men's dealings." Also that "if a man makes a law and it does not prove to be mutually advantageous, then this is no longer just." Finally, combining his definition of injustice: "Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions." It appears we have all the conditions necessary for it to be just to steal the wallet.

The situation of the married man, miserable with his job and life, is still troubling because it seems the hedonistic calculus *would* allow him to flee his family, even if they were not doing anything wrong and it was only his job and the burden of providing that contributed to his misery. I do not quite understand how the DeWitt quote would apply if the man finds himself in this unexpected situation. Situations arise that cannot be planned for.

If the highest good is pleasure and [death is nothing to us](#), then I can perfectly see how an Epicurean could sacrifice himself for a friend. But I know that friendship is cherished only because of its great contribution to a man's happiness. It still seems that this is valuing relationships in the wrong sort of way. This is an objection from alienation levied by Railton (<https://pages.ucsd.edu/faculty/rarnes...quentialism.pdf>). Imagine you ask your best friend why he helped you out in your time of need, and he answered "because your friendship is integral for my sustained happiness." It just seems like this sort of valuation, as a means to an end, is the wrong kind. Unless Epicurus makes an exception for friendship as an end in itself *along with* happiness, I can't see a way around it.

Again I should say I am an Epicurean, but am always looking to sharpen my understanding in light of objections.

Post by "Cassius" of January 9, 2019 at 11:20 AM

Hi Pivot - You addressed Hiram but I will go ahead with my own comments to your post.

As to each of your analogies - (the husband leaving the family; the wallet in the dark alley; the sociopath who escapes detection) all of those are difficult cases, but still not exceptions to the rule.

Let's up the ante - a sociopath develops a method of spending his entire life killing innocent babies for fun, but due to his method is never caught.

Does that change the fact of nature that there is no supernatural god? Does that change the fact of nature that there is no evidence to support any kind of "ideal form" or "essences" or "virtue in the air" to which to look for a standard, those remain invalid reference points.

What Epicurus was saying was that in the absence of valid "absolute" reference points we must look to whatever Nature gives us as a guide, and ultimately she gives us nothing more than pleasure and pain by which to judge the desirability of all things.

So in each of your examples it is entirely possible that results that we consider "bad" may take place, but that doesn't mean that there are gods or absolutes of any kind that tell us that we are right and the "bad actor" in any of those cases are wrong. If we think that some mechanism ought to be in place to discourage those results, then we organize communities and nations and police forces and armies, to enforce those rules, but in the absence of our doing so, there are no absolute forces anywhere which will enforce our preferences for us.

So that is one major aspect of what is going on here, about which Epicurus was realistic.

And so when you reach points such as "It just seems like this sort of valuation, as a means to an end, is the wrong kind." The key issue there is "**wrong** kind" - and the question is "Wrong by what standard?" Epicurus rejects false standards that do not really exist except in our minds, and Epicurus suggests that if we wish to look for "justification" for our own view of right and wrong, we can look nowhere else but to Nature if we want some kind of sanction outside ourselves. And the only guidance Nature has provided - to all living things - is the faculty of pleasure and pain.

Post by "Pivot" of January 9, 2019 at 11:49 AM

Cassius - good to speak with you again. The new forum updates look great.

What I'm trying to argue is that no matter how sophisticated the Epicurean in calculating his means to happiness, he will be barred from achieving it. Your first point (1) is the distinction I was drawing between the foolish Epicurean who pursues short-term pleasures versus the sophisticated Epicurean who carefully calculates the action leading best to his longterm happiness.

You describe virtue ethics as a tool "that may work at one moment, but be disastrous at the next moment." My contention is that: if a virtue can be momentarily dropped the instant it is deemed contrary to longterm happiness, the benefits of that virtue for one's character will not be fully achieved (if at all).

I ought to modify my conclusion a bit. Initially I claimed that a decision procedure of virtue ethics and a belief system (value structure) of Epicureanism is the best way to live, and now thanks to your Laertius quote that is considered not at all controversial. It is actually a bit exciting to see such affirmation in that quote. But the objection I am levying, I think, has deeper implications that make it impossible to have virtue ethics as an effective decision-procedure if the true end goal is happiness.

I am an honest man - but when my longterm happiness suffers from telling the truth, I lie.

I am a loyal man - but when my longterm happiness suffers from the endeavor, I abandon it.

I am a courageous man - but I would never do something that I calculate to be overly hard to win. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." (Letter to Menoeceus)

These virtues are only virtues insofar as they contribute to the end goal. This may not be a problem for an Epicurean. But it is clear that these virtues are not firm if they are conditional to that degree. If a virtue is not firm, you are unreliable in your ability to manifest them. It is very apparent in everyday life when someone does something of seemingly no benefit whatsoever to themselves, because they believe it is a virtuous thing to do. Likewise it is even more obvious when someone does something virtuous that also perfectly correlates with their longterm happiness. People who see this don't necessary think much of the virtuous act because it was prudent anyway. We revere the man who jumps on the grenade but scowl at the politician who publicly donates \$1m to Africa. It's the motive.

I noticed as I was writing my reply that you responded to my response to Hiram. I don't want to send you a wall of text, but I should add on with my response to that post:

Your responses to my three analogies are very interesting and I have not heard those positions before, so I am excited to explore the new territory. Please correct me if I misinterpret what you're claiming.

"Ultimately [nature] gives us nothing more than pleasure and pain by which to judge the desirability of all things."

Does she not also give us rationality? Without rationality, we would all be heroin addicts, injecting a substance that causes immense pleasure until a sudden death (forgive me for using this example but it is very convenient). We need not only the capacities for pleasure and pain,

and the intuitive abilities to distinguish them, but also the rational capacity in order to be sophisticated and calculated in our pursuit of them. Things which seemingly have no "pleasure content" must be pursued, of a variety of sorts, for greater pleasure in the end. We are not born masters of this skill, and it requires a great amount of rationality. Even with rationality we make mistakes and are always improving.

Now if we accept rationality as a guide for action, along with pleasure and pain, we may get sucked into a Kantian ethical theory which decides to take rationality as *the* guiding principle of action, instead of pleasure and pain... But that's a bit off-topic (would be interesting to explore elsewhere).

If we must look only at pleasure and pain to show the sociopath's killings to be truly immoral, it seems very simple. The amount of pain he is inflicting in killing many babies is astronomical and is surely greater than the pleasure he receives from the killing. That is a utilitarian argument which might be another can of worms, so feel free to ignore it because there is a more important one:

In the end we cannot live or organize society *without* this intuitive appeal to right and wrong I am suggesting. You appeal to it as well: "If we think that some mechanism ought to be in place to discourage those results..." But why should we think anything at all of it? There is no absolute to point to, as you said - only pleasure and pain. And if we are not adopting a utilitarian interpretation of Epicureanism, we have no reason at all to think a mechanism discouraging those horrific results should be in place.

If the regulating mechanism ought to be in place, then you open Epicureanism either to intuitionism or to utilitarianism. Without getting too flowery, I can't help but draw a parallel with the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these Truths to be **self-evident**, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness..."

There must be intuitive truths about how humans ought to conduct behavior toward one another that goes outside the limit of the hedonistic calculus. Any regulatory mechanism in society must appeal to these. I believe these truths are based fundamentally in our biology, and that our intuition is a result of natural selection, and partially this is why Epicureanism seems so intuitive to its followers (it does to me).

Post by "Hiram" of January 9, 2019 at 1:05 PM

On rationality, it is a tool, not an end. Reason does not furnish data from nature. It merely calculates from the data.

Our faculties of pleasure and aversion furnish data from nature on what is choice worthy and avoidance worthy, and we calculate based on that data. If we err, it is in the calculation. But there is no “error” in the data furnished (just as with the senses) because it came directly, unmediated, from nature.

The pleasure faculty, and the senses, are part of what we call the canon. Here’s a book on it:

<https://newepicurean.com/other-resource...ripod-of-truth/>

Post by “Hiram” of January 9, 2019 at 1:14 PM

Also I wish to address your worship of virtue separately. You will find this quote in “A Few Days in Athens”:

“Of all the thousands who have yielded homage to virtue, hardly one has thought of inspecting the pedestal she stands upon.”

This pedestal is pleasure.

How you deal with anger and other emotions determines if you are really Epicurean or Stoic or something else. To us, anger can be virtuous if channeled and made productive in such a way that it leads to a long-term pleasant life. Anger can be (un)natural, it can also be (ir)rational. So virtues, to us, are circumstantial. All our choices and avoidances require context to be carried out successfully and lead to pleasure.

<http://societyofepicurus.com/reasonings-on-philodemus-on-anger/>

Post by “Cassius” of January 9, 2019 at 1:25 PM

Pivot i am going to be delayed in responding to your most recent post but I wanted to think you for taking the time to write it. As far as i am concerned you are right over the target in seeing these as the issues which must be decided.

But for now when you say: "There must be intuitive truths about how humans ought to conduct behavior toward one another that goes outside the limit of the hedonistic calculus." I would ask why is that the case. If you are suggesting that there may be inborn dispositions to certain types of behavior, that can be encompassed under the Epicurean theory of "anticipations," but as for the desirability or undesirability of those actions there is no automatic gauge but pleasure and pain.

It seems that you are suggesting that there is a foolish Epicurean and an intelligent Epicurean, but to the extent someone sets a goal with anything other than ALL the effects (including over time) in his calculation, then that person is not accurately following the teachings of Epicurus.

"Now if we accept rationality as a guide for action, along with pleasure and pain, we may get sucked into a Kantian ethical theory which decides to take rationality as *the* guiding principle of action, instead of pleasure and pain... But that's a bit off-topic (would be interesting to explore elsewhere)." >>> I think you are exactly correct in your prediction where that would lead, so it is not off topic. Ultimately, as Hiram says, rationality can assist us in making all sorts of important calculations, but rationality cannot tell us what "better" means.

All I have time for at the moment but look forward to continuing.

Post by "Cassius" of January 9, 2019 at 6:23 PM

I hope we can try to reduce the argument down to those specific points which are the keys. This is an important one, but I don't quite think that this is it "There must be intuitive truths about how humans ought to conduct behavior toward one another that goes outside the limit of the hedonistic calculus."

I think Pivot that you are making a point more closely related to the "role of reason" but I am no quite sure that is it either. Not trying to short-circuit the discussion, but do you have a suggestion Pivot on how to most concisely state the ultimate point at issue?

Post by "Pivot" of January 10, 2019 at 5:52 AM

Hiram: I think I would agree with you on all of those points. Interestingly, the Aristotelian measure of virtue as it relates to anger (and other emotions) is that the behavior is tempered to

the situation. It also seems that tempering our behavior appropriately coincides with greater happiness in the long term.

Cassius: Sure - my post was a bit all over the place so I will try to distill it down to concrete premises and conclusions.

Issue 1: An Epicurean cannot have deep friendships and strong ambitions

1. An altruistic sacrifice is a sacrifice in which an individual gives up his own happiness for someone/something.
2. If an individual sacrifices his own happiness in order to eventually increase his long-term happiness, the sacrifice is not altruistic.
3. Deep relationships and strong ambitions require altruistic sacrifices.

4. Altruistic sacrifices are necessary in order to have the deepest sort of relationships and ambitions.
5. An Epicurean cannot rationally sacrifice his long-term happiness without the reward of greater happiness.
6. An Epicurean is not able to have the deepest sort of relationships and strong ambitions.

Issue 2: Horrible acts are considered permissible under Epicurean thought

1. A horrible act is a preventable action which severely harms another individual.
2. Injustice, as defined by Epicurus, is only an evil "... in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions."
3. Horrible acts can be committed without apprehension of being discovered.

4. If a horrible act is done without apprehension of being discovered, it is not unjust.
5. Certain horrible acts are not unjust.

I think we already agreed on Issue 2, and then moved on, but I just thought I'd lay my two arguments out formally so it's more clear.

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2019 at 8:27 AM

Yes I think you are correct as to issue two, in that Epicurus would say that the only standard for what is "horrible" is ultimately pain and pleasure, and thus the appeal to any other standard makes no sense (as they do not exist). I think we are pretty clear on that one.

I am not clear, however, on your issue one, and the assertion that Epicureans cannot have deep friendships and strong ambitions. I think Epicurus would define deep friendships and strong ambitions by the intensity of the feelings involved, rather than by any other standard of what a friend "should do" under any particular situation. Same would go for ambitions. For a cite in support of depth of emotion I would include this from Diogenes Laertius: "He [the wise man] will be more susceptible of emotion than other men: that will be no hindrance to his wisdom."

So I presume that you are stating as the basis for your first assertion your definitions that you believe altruistic sacrifices are necessary for strong friendship and strong ambitions. I am familiar with the first part as to friendship, but I don't think I have ever seen anyone assert that altruistic sacrifices are necessary for strong ambitions.

Can you state with any greater clarity the basis for those assertions?

As for issue two, where you conclude that "certain horrible acts are not unjust" that is definitely the Epicurean viewpoint, and you could probably expand it from "certain" to "many." But just so I understand your point, to what authority or source are you appealing to argue that they *should* be considered "unjust?" Stating that source will bring us even more clearly to the point in dispute.

Post by "Pivot" of January 10, 2019 at 11:58 AM

The reason I put "strong ambitions" is because it seems that certain endeavors require extreme sacrifice without any *visible* potential for future reward of long-term happiness. An Epicurean would likely abandon the ambition if it looked like it would involve more pain than happiness. But for the strongest of ambitions happiness must be largely disregarded, and the ambition must be put at the forefront. This, as I define it, is an altruistic sacrifice for an ambition. Altruistic sounds a bit strange here, I agree. I am using altruistic to describe the sacrifice of one's happiness for an ambition/person.

Take Elon Musk for example. If he wanted to maximize his net happiness, he would surely leave Tesla and SpaceX and live out a relaxing, extravagant life with his many billions. But he chooses to work day and night, year-round, in order that his ambitions (space travel, smart cars, etc) might become a reality. He values his ambitions more than his happiness, and because of this he is able to put his happiness aside for his ambitions to come true. You might

argue that his happiness is inextricably linked to his ambitions, and when he pursues his ambition he is actually pursuing happiness: "And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure." I agree with this! However, my point is this: if happiness is the sole consideration for one's decisions, he is not likely to embark on ambitions which require great long-term sacrifice. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." Yet those things which are hard to win are sometimes the most valuable - imagine if Elon Musk takes humanity to Mars with SpaceX.

As to the second issue, the source I'm attempting to appeal to is intuition based in reason. Using your example, the murderer who tortures babies: surely this is unjust. If the definition of injustice does not include horrible acts such as this, we should think the definition is improper. To a certain degree, our arguments must coincide with our intuition in order to make sense. Intuition, I think, is the primary basis for Epicurean thought entirely: pleasure is the highest good. Why? It does not need an answer as to "why," because it is self-evident. Likewise, it is self-evident that the prolonged torture of babies is unjust.

(I modified the example from the killing of babies to the torture of babies because it may be argued that death alone is not a misfortune)

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2019 at 3:50 PM

Ok we are making good progress -

1) When you write: "However, my point is this: if happiness is the sole consideration for one's decisions, he is not likely to embark on ambitions which require great long-term sacrifice. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." <<< You are pointing out a perceived contradiction between the natural and necessary discussion and any pleasure which requires lots of exertion to obtain. I agree that someone who interprets the "natural and necessary" passages too rigorously is going to make that error, but I don't think it is necessary to lay that error at the feet of Epicurus. This point fits very closely with my argument about the part of the letter to Menoeceus that says "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul." Yes I know the translations say that, and maybe they are even accurate to what Epicurus did write, but I think both of these issues (natural/necessary and pleasure=absence of pain) have to be taken in the overall context of the philosophy that would have been firmly established in the mind of any Epicurean student before he read that letter.

Even within the letter to Menoeceus itself there are other passages that also taken separately

would totally contradict the ascetic interpretation of those passages, and so what we're getting at here is that it is essential to take the philosophy as a whole and to interpret any apparent ambiguities or apparent contradictions in a way that is consistent with the message of the whole. So I agree that a standard academic interpretation of Epicurus is going to be vulnerable to the charge you are making. I simply think that the standard academic interpretation of Epicurus is largely worthless and not worth defending, so I take the DeWitt approach as amplified by Gosling & Taylor, [Nikolsky](#), and Wentham on the nature of Epicurean pleasure.

2) I would argue that death alone is probably a "misfortune" so I would have no issue with argument based on that. It's definitely not something to be desired except at those times when future pain will outweigh future pleasure. This is another issue where I would deviate from what I gather to be the academic consensus. They take the position you suggest, but I think that Epicurus would definitely say that the longer life can contain greater pleasure so would generally be preferred than the shorter life. That's another extremely interesting issue to discuss and develop over time. But the heart of the issue is this:

"Using your example, the murderer who tortures babies: surely this is unjust. If the definition of injustice does not include horrible acts such as this, we should think the definition is improper." << in a universe where "fate" and absolute principles do not exist, I do not believe you are safe in saying "surely." The "surely" implies facts not in evidence. Would it be possible to say that torture is *always* improper? There are lots of people who would argue that torture of one terrorist to save an innocent city from an atomic bomb would be totally proper. Can we "surely" say that torture of the terrorist's baby, or five or ten or any number of terrorist babies, to save that innocent city from atomic bombing would be improper? I doubt we can - at least I would be willing to entertain it myself, and I won't admit that that makes me a monster. 😊

Now you are returning to "intuition based in reason" for your sanction. As you know I think that there are very interesting questions revolving around the nature of anticipations in Epicurean thought, and to what extent they are related to intuitions. I know DeWitt rather strongly saw them as analogous. And there are related issues in regard to the faculty of pleasure -- from where does the programming that decides what we find pleasurable and painful come? So I think there is potential for common ground on "intuition" playing a role here, so long as the suggestion is not that intuition is programmed by supernatural gods, or by ideal forms existing in another dimension. But as to "reason" I would strongly insist with Epicurus that "with the assistance of reason" is the best that can be said for reason. Computers have no feelings of pleasure or any other "goal" other than what is given to them by their programmers. I see reason as a "tool" not unlike hammers and screwdrivers and compasses and plumb lines and the rest -- all very valuable to assisting us in projecting out consequences of future actions, but never providing in themselves any motivation to pursue any of those future actions.

Post by "Hiram" of January 10, 2019 at 4:32 PM

[Quote from Pivot](#)

...

3. Deep relationships and strong ambitions require altruistic sacrifices.

...

Issue 2: Horrible acts are considered permissible under Epicurean thought

Issue 1. I think I remember Philodemus saying that sometimes in order to keep or help a friend or loved one we suffer through many things (sacrifices, in your parlance) because the PAIN of not having the friend with us is much greater than the pain we go through assisting them.

So the key here is that it needs to pass hedonic calculus, and it does but only for people whom we truly love or who are truly worthy of our pain. Bob Marley once said there will always be people who will make you cry, and you have to choose to love the ones who are worth crying for. So two things:

1. You, if you are wise, will make the sacrifices for people who are worthy of your love.
2. You will also set BOUNDARIES with those of lesser worth. And this is JUST as important for your ataraxia. See [what Michel Onfray says about eumetry](#).

Issue 2 - the problem is that this is not only the case for Epicureans. Think of the predator priests in the Catholic Church, THEY'RE not using hedonic calculus or Epicurean ethics but they end up engaging in these acts because they think they can get away with it. Philodemus, I believe, said in one of his scrolls that it is indeed an uneasy question whether people do awful things if they can get away with it. This is a clear and accurate description of the problem we have in front of us. Gods or karma won't fix this problem because they do not exist.

"Justice" is that which produces mutual advantage, and an evil act that is not discovered is still unjust per Epicurean definitions. So if what we are saying is that injustices happen when no one is looking, then yes. That is accurate.

Post by "Godfrey" of January 10, 2019 at 10:17 PM

Elon Musk is a great example of how the hedonic calculus might work. It seems to me to be a process, a continuous feedback loop. As a person is considering embarking on a project, they consider the eventual fulfilment/happiness that they may obtain through working on and

completing the project. For any project there is a relationship between ambition (or perhaps altruism) and happiness: something along the lines of "wouldn't it be *awesome* if I could put man on Mars?!" Or for another person "I'd really be happy if I could get out of bed and walk on the beach!" At this point there is a particular amount of data with which to perform a hedonic calculus, depending on the person's situation.

Once the project is started, the continual (as opposed to continuous?) feedback loop begins. How much hard work will bring the person happiness? Maybe more or less than they thought, so they make an adjustment. Maybe the plan is to sacrifice short term happiness for long term happiness. As more data accumulates, more decisions can be made. And so on.

If we were blessed with infallible reason we wouldn't need this process. But we use our reason to evaluate the data we acquire through the Canon. Then we act on that and discover where our reasoning, or the data, was incorrect. Then we adjust and carry on.

The beauty of this, to me, is that this is simply how life works. With EP, we're conscious of that and work with it. We're not trying to force our lives, and those of others, into a mental construct.

Post by "JAWS" of January 12, 2019 at 10:27 AM

Framing a question is important because the frame limits the conclusions that one can reach. I read the original post and I realized that the way the question is framed does not fit with how I think about happiness. So I'd like to offer my frame as an alternative.

"But what if in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate goal, we end up not truly achieving it?" This frames happiness as the peak of some mountain that we are climbing and if the ultimate goal is to reach the top, then any means by which we can get there is fair game. A helicopter would be more efficient than climbing.

When we view happiness as the peak of a mountain we set ourselves up for failure. There is no such summit that can be reached that would mean lasting happiness simply because we got to the top, imho.

If instead, climbing is the goal, because we enjoy the climb, then our lives are complete even as we are climbing. In this frame, it doesn't matter whether one reaches the top or not, the pleasure of the journey is what we are after. Our friends etc. are not means to an end, but part of what makes the climb enjoyable. The Epicurean would argue that not only do friends make the climb enjoyable, but that they are necessary for us to be able to enjoy the climb at all.

I think the second way of thinking about it also prevents us from thinking that happiness is something that we can achieve and then not move away from once it has been achieved – just sitting on top of that mountain for the rest of our lives. It removes the idea that just a little more money, or the next big achievement at work or something is going to be enough to get us to that peak and bring us lasting happiness. It won't.

The way I approach happiness is not to find a goal or something that I think will make me happy if I achieve it/acquire it, but rather to ask myself what makes the everyday enjoyable.

My analogy is not perfect, and I'm sure you can poke holes in it, but it is sufficient for my happiness. I also do not have any reason to think this is an Epicurean stance, it is just my opinion.

In the example of Elon Musk, I would argue that anyone who works so hard for the sake of the end goal is not a happy person. Achieving the end goal rarely, if ever, provides lasting happiness. BUT, if Elon Musk does what he does because he loves the challenge of figuring out how to make these things happen and enjoys the process, then he is focused on the climbing and not the end goal and is likely a very happy person.

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2019 at 11:54 AM

Outstanding point JAWS. "When we view happiness as the peak of a mountain we set ourselves up for failure. There is no such summit that can be reached that would mean lasting happiness simply because we got to the top, imho." That calls to mind a LOT of the problem that happens when we try to fit Epicurean into theistic paradigms. How COULD there be a summit, or a point of final rest, in a universe which has no center and is constantly in motion. The very thought of such a point is inconceivable, so when Epicurus discusses "happiness" as "the goal" (Torquatus did, but did Epicurus ever really use that construct?) we have to understand happiness as only snapshot along the path, and not in any sense a final ending point or summit.

Post by “Pivot” of January 30, 2019 at 3:39 AM

Apologies for my infrequency here. I would like to preface by saying that, while my intention may come across as trying to pin down and prove Epicurean thought as wrong, my goal is only to examine it in order to understand certain claims; that I may see them clearer after

discussion.

Cassius:

Display Spoiler

"I agree that someone who interprets the 'natural and necessary' passages too rigorously is going to make that error, but I don't think it is necessary to lay that error at the feet of Epicurus."

How else ought they be interpreted? The problem I see is that it is written is very explicitly. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." And also, as we discussed a while back, PD3: "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. [...]" It is very difficult for me to interpret this quote in any other way than what is explicitly stated. That is, when all pain is removed, that state of ataraxia and aponia are the LIMIT with respect to pleasure. I can't conceive of this in a way somehow allowing this to NOT be the limit, unless something is to be said about mistranslation, or a hole in the principle doctrines. Or even that certain modification is necessary.

2) I agree that in special circumstances, horrible acts can be justified. But notice in the example you give of torturing babies to prevent an atomic bomb, the justification is implicit. We intuit more lives to be more valuable than fewer lives, and then we use rationality to understand that in one example, more lives are lost. But let's paint the example differently, to prevent these self-justifying cases. What if the babies are being tortured at no gain, other than the torturer's satisfaction? Can we really not say that this is unjust? Hiram has a response to this issue as well - "an evil act that is not discovered is still unjust per Epicurean definitions." But what defines an evil act? I cannot see how Epicurean doctrine encompasses the example we gave here into the category of evil acts.

Hiram:

Display Spoiler

Issue 1: I agree with most of what you say here, but I still think the motivation for friendship will prevent the Epicurean from having the deepest of friendships. You mention: "sometimes in order to keep or help a friend or loved one we suffer through many things (sacrifices, in your parlance) because the PAIN of not having the friend with us is much greater than the pain we go through assisting them." This seems right until the "because". When one makes a sacrifice for a friend, does he think, "okay, I'd rather this sacrifice than to lose this friend, so I will make it to maximize my happiness"? If this is the thought, it seems a very impersonal (at best) reason to do so.

It seems to me that a friendship that constantly needs to pass the hedonic calculus is prevented from trying tests. Sometimes situations arise where the relationship no longer appears mutually beneficial. Perhaps you discover you are sacrificing a lot and not receiving much pleasure. A committed friend who sticks it out because "loyalty is a virtue," is likely more resilient, and better able to develop a strong long-term relationship than an Epicurean. The Epicurean should cut the friendship off, because after the hedonic calculus, he has determined that the relationship is going to only result in more pain than pleasure.

Even those we truly love must be weighed as some quantity of pleasure in our hedonic calculus. This seems wrong to begin with, but after further analysis it appears even more problematic for the reasons outlined above.

It should be tempting to say, "proper use of the hedonic calculus will take into consideration the pleasure of a potential strong long-term friendship." But the hedonic calculus is limited to our point of view. If everything in the situation points to the relationship giving more pain than pleasure, more sacrifice than reward, and no apparent hope for a fix, then the hedonic calculus SHOULD mandate a split. But imagine instead you stayed in the compromised relationship, simply out of loyalty to the friend? Perhaps the friend has done the same for you in difficult times. The eventual and unpredictable reward resulting from this loyalty may result in more happiness than if the hedonic calculus was used. This is the crux of the argument - that certain rewards are given only to those who do not (and CANNOT) expect them. Whether these rewards outweigh the pain endured in more unfortunate situations is unknown, but that is why this is up for discussion.

Without making this post absolutely unreadable... I'd like to just respond to JAWS' point:

I agree my framing was misleading. I should amend "ultimate goal" to "ultimate end." That is, "But what if in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate end, we end up not truly achieving it"?

I don't mean to imply happiness is a summit to be reached. I mean to highlight the fact that happiness is the true end behind all of our actions. You mention, "Our friends etc. are not means to an end, but part of what makes the climb [of life] enjoyable." Then what happens when our friends no longer make our climb enjoyable? We ought to drop them and find new ones that are more fun. The discussion should go similarly to the one with Hiram above.

Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2019 at 7:07 AM

I will have to come back later to respond to the main material but no worries as to the "intent" - deep discussion like this is how we make progress in reconstructing.

Post by “Cassius” of January 30, 2019 at 8:27 AM

Almost all of our difference of opinion stems from this:

How else ought they be interpreted? The problem I see is that it is written is very explicitly. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." And also, as we discussed a while back, PD3: "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. [...]" It is very difficult for me to interpret this quote in any other way than what is explicitly stated. That is, when all pain is removed, that state of ataraxia and aponia are the LIMIT with respect to pleasure. I can't conceive of this in a way somehow allowing this to NOT be the limit, unless something is to be said about mistranslation, or a hole in the principle doctrines. Or even that certain modification is necessary.

I will not say you are wrong, but I will say that I interpret things very differently because while the sentences you quote taken separately are quite clear, they do not stand alone, and they occur within a definite context which in my view prohibits the conclusions you think are clear.

The context in my view is that long before these positions would have been stated, Epicurus had previously stated that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain. He had also previously stated, in PD3, that the limit in QUANTITY of pleasure is the absence of pain. Everything must be interpreted in that context, and within that context, whatever is not pain is by definition pleasure, and whatever is not pleasure is by definition pain, and the quantity of absence of one is ALWAYS the quantity of presence of the other, by definition. And that means that when one goes to zero quantity, the other goes to its limit of quantity, by definition. However this is only a definition of QUANTITY, which Epicurus is careful to state in the beginning.

So yes, zero pain is the "limit" of pleasure, but only in quantity, and not in any other respect. If it were not necessary for us to take other aspects of pleasure into account, we could by definition live the best life possible by killing ourselves, or drugging ourselves comatose, because in both cases that results in zero pain. That would be a perverse result, but that is exactly the result that is produced by reading these texts in isolation and not seeing them as part of the whole. A whole in which **"Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling**

the rule by which to judge of every good thing" and "I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form."

The same thing goes for the sentence that when we have no pain, we have no need of pleasure. Taken alone that seems clear, but it does not mean that suicide or being comatose is the best life. Viewed from the perspective of quantity, any Epicurean who sees that pain has been reduced to zero also knows that it has been reduced to zero by filling the human experience completely with pleasure, so as to drive out all pain. In Cicero's phrase, "**Nothing is preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.**"

Or, in the words of Torquatus: "**Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?**"

And in this context, natural and necessary also is seen not to be a call to the "zero life" but simply the observation that some things in life require a lot of effort, and some things don't, and that in general those things that require a lot of effort entail at least the possibility of a lot of pain. But if you keep in mind that the goal is pleasure, and not the zero state of absence of pain, then this observation is nothing more than a part of the analysis that before you choose to do something that entails a lot of effort, you better be sure that you will in fact get a lot of pleasure, and you better be sure that you do it in such a way as to minimize pain. Flying to the moon requires a lot of effort but can be done safely with a huge investment in modern technology, and therefore can be viewed as a tradeoff that is very worthwhile. But flying to the moon without proper preparation is going to lead to great physical pain and perhaps death, and so is not to be undertaken lightly.

So in sum each of the quotations that appear in isolation to call for a minimal life can be seen to not call for a minimal life at all. Did Epicurus live a minimal life by surrounding himself with a philosophical school of people, churning out books, running a household with many slaves and, and leading a philosophical revolution? Did Lucretius pursue minimal living with the Herculean effort of his poem? Of course not - they saw their lives as short and precious, and needing to be filled with the activities that would bring them the most pleasure while at the same time pursuing that pleasure in a way that would cause as little pain as possible. But they certainly knew and welcomed the pain that would be required in their effort, because they knew that the pleasure that would be produced was well worth it.

Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2019 at 5:16 PM

Pivot -- I apologize if you have answered this already, but can you tell me how much of Lucretius you have read? Today I was listening to the Partially Examined Life podcast on Lucretius, and I find it interesting to correlate a person's views on Epicurean ethics with their views of Lucretius. Can you let me know how deeply into Lucretius you have read, and your reaction to it? Thanks!

Post by "Pivot" of January 30, 2019 at 6:53 PM

You mention, "He had also previously stated, in PD3, that the limit in QUANTITY of pleasure is the absence of pain." Where is the word "quantity" mentioned? Magnitude, as stated in the quote, does not necessarily imply quantity. I tried to do some investigating, and the word we're contesting is "μεγέθους." Perseus.uchicago.edu defines this to be "greatness, magnitude, size, height, stature." This is very different from quantity in my opinion, and the alternative definitions show that "quantity" would be a bit of a mistranslation. Here's where I got the Greek-English principle doctrines: <http://monadnock.net/epicurus/principal-doctrines.html>

It is interesting you bring up the results of reading the quote explicitly. But I do not think taking them at face-value is misreading them. The language itself prevents the reader from construing them in any fashion other than what is written, unless we should say "Epicurus MEANT to write ___." And that may be fine, perhaps in his lost writings he consolidated these views.

You mention, "Viewed from the perspective of quantity, any Epicurean who sees that pain has been reduced to zero also knows that it has been reduced to zero by filling the human experience completely with pleasure, so as to drive out all pain. In Cicero's phrase, 'Nothing is preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.'"

But should we think that pain can be driven out by pleasurable experience? We think of a man drinking away his sorrows, or someone going to a party to drive away his depression. Mental pain must be extinguished before we can experience ultimate pleasure in life, as ataraxia is the highest state of pleasure. Ataraxia is not achievable if there are underlying troubles in one's mind. Cicero's quote requires first, before the cramming full of pleasures, a "life of tranquility."

And again in Torquatus, there is this condition of the pleasurable life: "undisturbed by the presence ... of pain."

You mention, " ... before you choose to do something that entails a lot of effort, you better be sure that you will in fact get a lot of pleasure, and you better be sure that you do it in such a way as to minimize pain."

This is precisely why I argue deep friendships are impossible in Epicurean thought. Relationships require immense effort. However, often it is without the promise of a lot of pleasure. Often it is impossible to be sure one will receive anything at all in return. *Even after weighing all the pleasure associated with the totality of one's friend/partner*, the conclusion may be that the sacrifice outweighs the reward. The man who cuts off the friendship may be losing much more than the man who keeps the friendship and endures the suffering. As I worded it to Hiram, some rewards can only be received by those who do not endeavor for them.

To answer your last post - I've enjoyed all of Lucretius. It is probably my favorite work of philosophy. I would say that my favorite part of it is more to do with his arguments against the lamentation of death. Whether we wasted our lives, or lived full lives, the end of life should not be lamented. This was shocking to read, yet the arguments he made were very moving -- particularly when Lucretius directly addresses "the nature of things," and quotes her responses to the man lamenting his death.

Apart from his ideas of death, the arguments against immortality and the existence of gods were also very fascinating to read. The reasoning he uses is very simple and intuitive but impactful. One example: the soul is "begotten along and grows along with the body" (3.457); therefore, when the body deteriorates and dies, the soul does the same.

I was attracted to Epicurus through Lucretius, as I read his work before any of Epicurus' works. But Lucretius was a devout follower of Epicurus, and I was equally attracted by many of Epicurus' ideas once I began looking into them.

I think PD3 can be read in another way without disturbing the body of Epicurean thought. As per PD3, the limit of the magnitude of pleasure is freedom from pain. Let's assume there is no more pleasurable a state than ataraxia, total freedom of pain. Does this reduce the Epicurean to an ascetic, called to live a dull, boring life? I would say no, because of the following: is it possible for a human being to be happy with a totally empty, pleasure-free life? The absence of all pleasure surely should be the worst suffering one can endure! True "freedom from pain" IMPLIES the existence of a multitude of pleasures, both simple and complex.

Post by "Cassius" of January 31, 2019 at 8:59 AM

"This is precisely why I argue deep friendships are impossible in Epicurean thought." << If you believe that this is correct, why are you still interested in Epicurean thought? You are willing to give up deep friendships, or you simply think Epicurus was wrong in that?

As far as "quantity" vs magnitude, size, height, stature, all of those seem to be indications of

measurement in a single plane to me, and of course (at least to me) a feeling has many more dimensions than one.

"But should we think that pain can be driven out by pleasurable experience?" -- Here I would say absolutely YES, and in fact, since there are only two feelings, there is in fact no way to drive away pain OTHER THAN replacing it with pleasure.

It's interesting to me that after your explanation we still end up here: "True "freedom from pain" IMPLIES the existence of a multitude of pleasures, both simple and complex," which is exactly the position I take, but for different reasons.

Perhaps a summary would be, that when you say "Mental pain must be extinguished before we can experience ultimate pleasure in life, as ataraxia is the highest state of pleasure." To me that formulation implies that ataraxia is a type of pleasure. I do not in fact that that ataraxia is a type of pleasure at all -- I think it is purely an adverbial description of the best way to experience a life of pleasures of the type we all know and understand (typical mental and physical pleasures) without any disturbance in that enjoyment. Disturbance and absence of disturbance do not tell us a thing about the type of pleasures we are experiencing, only that we are experiencing with or without the interruption of pain.

So now I have to consider the implications of reaching the same conclusion by a different analysis! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 10, 2019 at 7:04 AM

I see that I had forgotten in my earlier comment this explicit use of the term "Quantity" by [Martin Ferguson Smith in his translation of the Inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda](#). That needs to be referenced in this discussion:

Fr. 34 lower margin (Epic. Sent. 3)

[The quantitative limit of pleasure is the] removal of all pain. [Whoever experiences pleasure, so long as it continues, cannot ever be troubled] by pain of body or of mind or [of both together].

Fr. 34 lower margin (Epic. Sent. 3)
[The quantitative limit of pleasure is the] removal of all pain. [Whoever experiences pleasure, so long as it continues, cannot ever be troubled] by pain of body or of mind or [of both together].