

Why Does Stoicism Seem to Be More Popular Than Epicureanism, Especially In England?

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2019 at 11:28 AM

[Poster1](#): Looking at the growth of Modern Stoicism compared to Epicureanism. There is Stoic week, quite a lot of books, very active Facebook communities, podcasts etc and even a Stoic meet up group in Manchester UK where I live. Does anybody have any opinion why the same hasn't happened with Epicureanism? Do you think that will change in the near future? And how that could be achieved?

Many thanks x

Poster2 - It requires a physical effort and cost to remove oneself from society and to find friends willing to do the same. To most people, that is impractical at best and culty at worst.

Also - the true asceticism and discipline required is probably beyond most hedonic moderns.

Ep1 - Why are you associating removing yourself from society and being ascetic with Epicurean philosophy? Epicurus participated in public religious rites and attended plays with enjoyment. He held feasts in his Garden.

The discipline needed is only to avoid actions that bring more pain than pleasure, which is actually pretty easy once you understand it and enjoy it in action. Net pleasure is very motivating and an easy habit to acquire.

It is mainly false beliefs that stand in the way-- false ideas that there is something wrong with a life of pleasure.

I live according to Epicurean principles. I do not isolate myself. I started a meetup to promote Epicurean living. So far what I have found is that people resist the philosophy not because it is hard but because they cannot let go of indoctrination into illusory ideals, like thinking there is inherent value in asceticism. The atheists here tend to be secular Buddhists or humanists.

Poster A2: I think that stoicism is more popular because it is a passive posture, and a martyr posture, both things have a very close relation with catholic religions, where the more you endure suffering the more close you are to god, and were you will be saved by someone else but not by yourself.

Poster MK:

Stoicism has benefitted from backing from the field of psychology.

CBT appeals to Stoic practises like premeditatio malorum, view from above perspective re-alignment, reaction control, etc.

It has made Stoic ideas more attractive and academically viable.

Many modern exponents refer recurrently to “evidence-based” results for the efficacy of these coping strategies.

The buzz built surrounding Stoicism in therapeutic praxis has been capitalised on to organise such events as Stoic week, Stoicon, so on.

Epicurean thought is a bit more niche. Rather ironically given that it was considered to be too populist in antiquity.

Christianity likely contributes as well.

Virtues (conceived of as improbable standards of conduct), ascetic and meditation practises, fatalism.

It's all rather a snug fit for post-Christian societies of formerly Roman Catholic/High Church varieties.

It's again, if differently, psychological after all.

It is easiest to make a transition away from something, if it's to what is similar still.

Most people don't like admitting what they've believed all their life and what their culture has grown up around is completely wrong and risible.

They instinctively want to keep as much as possible. Stoicism allows a lot of Christianity to come with it.

That's only the English-speaking side of the story though.

Epicureans in Greece do hold conferences, meet together, print publications, etc.

Epicurean teachings historically always succeeded organically at all events.

Epicurus himself set his face against the Academy and Lyceum. Of which our contemporary teaching institutions are pale, conscious, imitations.

I expect Epicurus wouldn't be best pleased at universities arranging events on his behalf.

Friends in a garden with cheese was his sort of conference or meet-up.

As for podcasts, communities and the rest. Who can say why really?

This group and several members are quite active.

But I suppose the prevalence in academia of Stoic/Stoic'ed up claims and ideas makes it inevitable.

Podcasts, blogs, meme/FB communities are precisely the sort of thing students/salaried academics do.

Poster DR:

The truth is that Stoicism has benefitted substantially from scientific backing in the form of research on CBT whereas Epicureanism has been hampered by the fact that it seems much more at odds with current psychological research on emotional wellbeing.

Poster E1: Having seen CBT work wonders for a family member with severe OCD and social anxiety-- learning that the discomfort of their fear will not injure them by practicing exposure in graded doses-- I see no conflict between CBT and EP. They learn the difference between false fears and reality. They are not taught to lose fear of truly dangerous things but to overcome false fear of harmless things.

Epicurus used a form of CBT, by having his students replace their unfounded fears with reality through memorization of his doctrines and meditation/study of reality.

His reminder that severe pain is short and other pain is bearable is meant to lessen fear of the future. CBT does this same thing by demonstrating this truth in action. The agoraphobic person gradually experiences that they don't die of fear from going outside their home-- that it becomes bearable and then eventually goes away!

Epicurus also notes that sometimes we will chose to experience pain for greater pleasure-- which is consistent with the difficulty in early CBT that leads to freedom from false fears and a constricted life. The goal of CBT is not to live enduring fear-- it is to reduce and then eliminate false fear.

Poster MH: We're still here! Most people have a hard time accepting oblivion upon death. Especially if they feel cheated by life and want a reboot! But if you accept your mortality and can become self-sufficient Epicureanism can provide a content life. Thomas Jefferson believed so.

Cassius: Let me restate Antonio and Martin but be more blunt.

Stoicism is a repackage of commonplace religion and humanist positions on the place of individuals in the universe and the goal of "being a good person" -- which is (as Martin says) "a snug fit" for people of conventional religious and moral beliefs.

Epicurean philosophy is a radical rejection of the implications of religion in all its forms, from the rejection of supernatural gods to the rejection of life after death.

Which all means that Stoicism allows for the easy continuation of fantastic and preposterous religious and moral idealism in all its many forms. Stoicism is particularly in harmony with prevailing ethics and morality in areas where English is the dominant language, as the original post indicates. There is something in the water, especially in the mother country, which has made cultivation of endurance of pain through the "stiff upper lip" approach somehow an element of pride, rather than of the shame it should be.

The only major quibble I have with Martin's summary is that while I agree that Epicurus would be displeased with the events that modern universities arrange in his name, it would not be because he preferred gardens and cheese.

The reason would be, as Martin says, because "Epicurus himself set his face against the Academy and Lyceum. Of which our contemporary teaching institutions are pale, conscious, imitations."

I would go much further. Epicurus set his face not only against the Academy and the Lyceum, but also against the conventional idealism and morality that they spawn, of which much of decadent English society (applicable to the USA too) is but a pale conscious imitation.

Cassius: Especially for England, a land where the determinism that Epicurus detested flowers, I would add to the list: "Are you confirmed in the viewpoint that individuals are largely personally responsible for the outcomes of their decisions on how to live their lives?"

Post by "Mousikos" of May 14, 2019 at 10:18 AM

I think it is at least partly because Stoicism is riding on the coat tails on the one hand of CBT and as a way of distancing oneself from negative feelings, and on the other hand of traditional masculinity which has seen a rise in popularity in the face of an out of control social justice / political correctness movement which likes to demonize (especially white) maleness. Stoicism also has better name recognition.

I think Epicureanism suffers from a lack of name recognition, as well as a skewed understanding of what it is about. A hedonistic pursuit of the good life does not strongly invite people who are interested in philosophy. And pleasure seekers may not be all that interested in philosophy.

So I think we should try to reach out more broadly and let people, especially in non-religious communities, know what Epicurean Philosophy is about.

Post by “Cassius” of May 14, 2019 at 10:22 AM

[Quote from Mousikos](#)

A hedonistic pursuit of the good life does not strongly invite people who are interested in philosophy. And pleasure seekers may not be all that interested in philosophy.

I think that hits the nail on the head. The issue is not "sex drugs and rock and roll" - the issue is that pleasure is a feeling, and Epicurean philosophy is essentially a war to explain that "feeling" is ultimately what life is all about, rather than "logic" or "reason" or "virtue" or "piety to the gods."

Post by “michelepinto” of May 15, 2019 at 2:48 AM

[Quote from Mousikos](#)

A hedonistic pursuit of the good life does not strongly invite people who are interested in philosophy. And pleasure seekers may not be all that interested in philosophy.

This is a fault of philosophy itself, because people that want to be happy do not seek happiness in philosophy. And People want to be happy!

Post by “Mousikos” of May 15, 2019 at 6:31 AM

We should have someone do a TED talk on how Epicurean philosophy helps people live happier lives.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 15, 2019 at 4:49 PM

There's an essay by Mark Walker, "A Life Worthy of the Gods: Towards A Neo-Epicurean Moral Psychology" in the pdf which can be downloaded from:

<http://collections.crest.ac.uk/15068/>

He discusses how EP could be linked with positive psychology, briefly comparing it to how Stoicism is linked to cognitive behavioral psychology. It's an interesting read that might be pertinent here.

Post by “Mousikos” of May 16, 2019 at 12:41 AM

That looks very interesting, [Godfrey](#) ! I've had an interest in positive psychology for years, and this seems to nicely tie in. I will have a read.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 2:09 PM

This thread came up when I did a search for "Positive Psychology". I was wondering if Positive Psychology could be said to be the modern version of Epicureanism, just as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is claimed by some to be the modern version of Stoicism. (Indeed, the fellow who heads up the annual "Stoicon" conference is a CBT therapist.) The link to an article above does not work anymore.

Obviously, modern psychology has little to do with atomic theory or the gods. Maybe that is its weakness. Every good ancient philosopher knew that a good philosophy needed to be grounded in physics and/or metaphysics! But if Positive Psychology is the science of what makes people happy, would we not be behooven as Epicureans to study it?

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/938-why-does-stoicism-seem-to-be-more-popular-than-epicureanism-especially-in-englan/>

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2020 at 4:44 PM

I am not familiar with a specific school of psychology known as "Positive Psychology." I know from a private message that Godfrey has an article that we might want to post here, but maybe someone knows a more representative link that would explain the issue.

Is this wikipedia article a decent start? https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology

If so, it might occupy an uneasy middle ground between Epicurus and Aristotle and/or Humanism, and it seems those ultimately resolve in favor of the non-Epicurean approach because they insist on gravitating toward "meaningfulness" rather than "pleasure." "Eudaemonia" and "flourishing" seem to always end up being Aristotelian.

Quote

Positive psychology is concerned with [eudaimonia](#), "the good life" or [flourishing](#), living according to what holds the greatest value in life – the factors that contribute the most to a well-lived and fulfilling life. While not attempting a strict definition of the good life, positive psychologists agree that one must live a [happy](#), engaged, and meaningful life in order to experience "the good life." [Martin Seligman](#) referred to "the good life" as "using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic [happiness](#) and abundant gratification".^[7]

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2020 at 5:05 PM

Yes that wikipedia article goes into what I would expect the issue to be: What does "positive" mean? Why use the word "positive" rather than 'pleasure'? Do they resolve "positive" as meaning things beyond pleasure? And yes according to this they head right back into the "virtue ethics" issues that seem to characterize humanism. And to these extent these categories are accepted as ends in themselves, this would definitely appear to be an Aristotelian, rather than Epicurean, approach:

Character Strengths and Virtues (edit)
Main article: Character strengths and virtues
See also: Character education, moral education, and values in action inventory of strengths
The development of the Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) handbook (2004) represented the first attempt by Seligman and Peterson to identify and classify positive or virtuous traits of general psychology. The CSV provided a theoretical framework to assist in understanding strengths and virtues and for their application in various areas of human life. "Virtue ethics", underlying its measurable character strengths.^[6]
The CSV suggested three virtues have a historical basis in the vast majority of cultures. In addition, these virtues and strengths can lead to increased happiness and the suggestion of uncommonly traits. Benefits: 1. The study of positive human qualities to extend the scope of psychology of research to include mental wellness, 2. the leaders' wisdom, suggesting people are "motivationally primed" toward certain virtues, and 3. virtue has a biological basis.^[6]
The organization of the 6 virtues and 24 strengths is as follows:
1. **Wisdom and knowledge**: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, innovation
2. **Courage**: bravery, persistence, integrity, stability, and
3. **Humanity**: love, kindness, social intelligence
4. **Justice**: citizenship, fairness, leadership
5. **Temperance**: forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence, self-control
6. **Transcendentalism**: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

Post by "Godfrey" of October 3, 2020 at 6:34 PM

Here's the pdf; I mistakenly uploaded it in another thread.

Post by "Don" of October 3, 2020 at 6:54 PM

I put this in the wrong thread at first. Mea culpa!

Copied from the other thread:

I found some notes of mine in my Google Drive relating to positive psychology. PLEASE note, these were not for public consumption, but I thought the raw notes would give an idea where my head was at at the time:

Quote

Epicureanism is NOT pop "positive psychology" See <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/...gion-secularism> "Seligman's inclusion of material achievement in the components of happiness has also raised eyebrows. He has theorized that people who have not achieved some degree of mastery and success in the world can't be said to be flourishing. He once described a "thirty-two-year-old Harvard University summa in mathematics who is fluent in Russian and Japanese and runs her own hedge fund" as a "poster child for positive psychology." But this can make well-being seem exclusive and out of reach, since accomplishment of this kind is not possible to all, or even most."

This all sounds very Aristotelian or Peripatetic! Epicurus wanted eudaimonia to be accessible to EVERYONE! ----- BUT I was listening to a TED Radio Hour today 12/3/2019 about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs... and realized it seemed VERY Epicurean: KD 29: Among desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural and unnecessary, and some are unnatural and unnecessary (arising instead from groundless opinion). The necessary desires are at the bottom. To not be hungry, etc. The need for security is the social contract Epicurus talks about. Love and friendship is next. It gets a little more fuzzy with self-esteem and self-actualization but I think the similarities remain and are worth exploring!

And in looking at this again, I think that some Positive Psychology research may be of interest and use from an Epicurean perspective. That specific article that I linked to just struck me the wrong way.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 8:42 PM

This is great information. Thank you. I read Godfrey's article too. That one certainly makes it seem like Positive Psychology stole a bunch of stuff from Epicureanism, called it a New Science and slapped a whole lot of modern jargon onto it. The overall effect is to take away some of the forcefulness of the original sources, for me. Seligman's work above does not even resemble science to me.

There are some of their findings that seem more rigorous - actual studies as to activities or attitudes that make for a happier person. One take-away I remember from them (I'm sorry I forget the source), was that concerns about finding "meaning" in life tend to evaporate when a person's essential needs for happiness are met, e.g. friendships, security, autonomy, privacy, etc. Since Epicurus is accused of teaching that life is meaningless, perhaps this would be an answer to that.

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 9:41 PM

The whole "meaning of life" thing is problematic from my perspective. Monty Python gave their version of the "meaning of life" at the end of the film of the same name:

Quote

Well, it's nothing very special. Try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.

That sums it up. The more people look for some kind of transcendent, all-encompassing Meaning of Life (capital M, capital L), the more we're potentially seduced into looking for something outside of the ordinary and into the supernatural. There is also the Make Money, Greed is Good version of the Meaning of Life that also leads to all kinds of problems and pain.

Epicurus provided sound, attainable goals in living your life, pursuing pleasure, and doing your best to not be harmed and doing no harm in turn. That's not Meaning. That's simply prudence and justice in service to pleasure. For me, it's liberating to not have some Search for Meaning hanging over me. I need not feel oppressed by the need to search for some deeper Meaning. Granted, I'm still coming to grips with this idea. I haven't been exploring Epicureanism for very long, around four years. The realization that the universe had no deeper meaning or literally didn't care about me (It's not a conscious being! How can it care! And there is no God dealing out favors or punishments!) was a little disconcerting at first then liberating. There is no external rule book imposed on us. Nature provides the only limitations and guides needed, if we

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listen. Epicurus listened, then passed that along and encouraged us to listen to Nature, too.