

Back to the Basics: the Ethics

Post by “Hiram” of May 20, 2018 at 2:14 PM

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Very often, in our public forums questions are raised about choice-making that require us to not confuse the means with the end. The answer to moral problems in Epicurean philosophy is always found in hedonic calculus, but this calculus requires an understanding of what our nature is and what the limits of our desires and pleasures are, if we are to live a blessed life of pleasure, satisfaction and contentment.

It usually seems to me that the easiest route to answering moral questions is found in the middle portion of Epicurus’ Epistle to Menoecus, which is the summary of the ethical doctrines of the school and provides general guidelines for our choices and avoidances. This is why Epicurus said we must keep going [back to the basics](#) until they become strong and firm in our minds. More specifically, when it comes to choices and avoidances, it is in the middle portion of the tract that we find the most concise, clear instruction by which we find the most fail-safe way of creating for ourselves a life filled with all the pleasures that nature makes available to us. Below is the Bailey translation of the middle portion, and the exhortation (which comes at the end of the epistle) to study philosophy daily, and both alone and with kindred spirits.

Please take the time to carry out a detailed study of [Epicurus’ Epistle to Menoecus](#). It is a pearl of the highest value among classical, ethical and humanist literature: wise, concise, brief, detailed, and potent. It teaches us that the essence of morality and of moral reform is not found in becoming subservient to external ideals, but in studying and living in accordance to our own nature and becoming empowered in our choices and avoidances. We also add the most to others’ happiness and flourishing by choosing naturalness and authenticity over cultural convention—particularly when we study and practice philosophy together with them. There’s even a [video version](#), the [Cyril Bailey translation](#), and the [Elemental Edition](#)—all put together by [New Epicurean](#). Please share these pearls of wisdom with others!

Quote

We must consider that **of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.** The right understanding of these facts enables us to **refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul’s) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness.** For it is to obtain

this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfil the good of the soul and the good of the body. For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure. And for this cause **we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life**. For **we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us**, and **from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance**, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as **the standard by which we judge every good**.

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason **we do not choose every pleasure**, but **sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them**: and similarly **we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time**. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet **not every pleasure is to be chosen**: even as **every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided**. Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest enjoy luxury pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that **all that is natural is easy to be obtained**, but that which is superfluous is hard. And so plain savors bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed; and bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips. To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a man alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune.

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest

disturbance of the spirit.

Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like unto a mortal being.