

One way of Re-framing EP - expose the hidden context

Post by "Scott" of February 7, 2022 at 1:58 PM

Pretty much everyone in this EF forum understands that EP gets a bad rap from mainstream culture, and has ever since Stoics and Christians and similar "transcendent value" ethics have held sway. An (abbreviated) version of the most common critical narrative goes something like this:

Epicureanism is about hedonism, which means they pursue pleasure instead of the (grander) {virtue/deity worship/other abstract/transcendent values/value systems}. Chasing after pleasures is shallow, unreliable and dangerous to oneself and society.

Challenging this narrative is difficult, at best. Arguing that going after pleasure as your final goal makes more sense than going after abstract transcendent values ("ATVs" lol 😊) as a final goal is an uphill battle. As Cassius said in the thread on Eusebius: "Christians and most of the rest of the world think that Epicureans are monsters. Or that Epicurus was an Antichrist even. This is why we can't get too complacent and think that "everyone wants to be happy" means the same thing to everyone."

Exactly! So I'd like to throw out some thoughts about one way to deal with this. A "re-framing" (for us, but also for those with whom we engage). Probably some EFers have already used this kind of approach and apologies if this is nothing new to you, but in any case I think this can be an effective approach to presenting EP to the world, so I'm just writing it down and putting it out here.

I'm suggesting a way to simply be more honest - to put everything on the table - and in so doing be better able to directly challenge the challengers, because in fact the honest truth is THEY are all chasing after pleasure just as much as every other organism. This approach is a slight twist in direction, but I think a significant, and impactful one. I consider it pretty easy for instance to point out to an anti-EPer that what they are doing is done because they want to feel good. Feeling good is what we mean by pleasure. They will resist this approach at first, of course, but ...we all know they WANT pleasure, so does every other being, and this is ultimately inescapable. This point must be won first, and I think it can be won, if pursued. You really have to go to unusual lengths to try to disagree with this point (I'll work some of these up I've heard and list some of them later. I invite others to share any arguments against this and know resolutions).

Some of the elements of this re-framing would probably include items on the list below. Note, again, that this is an offensive move to expose underlying motivation(s) in ATVs rather than the defensive approach of first arguing for EP's perspective. The points below for that reason

overlap a bit - the goal of them is to break up misleading, incorrect mental habit patterns about motivations.

- ATVs create a feeling of belonging - as "membership" in any group can - but is dramatically stronger because there is a god or some other abstract Super-Value they all share, making them all feel sort of Super-Special. This FEELS VERY GOOD.
- Having a religion or ethic based on something "transcendent" gives individuals a feeling of being in touch with MEANING and POWER - that is very comforting. Comfort FEELS GOOD. The individual is motivated to do this because they want to **feel good** about themselves. (I have found most anti-EPers would have to eventually agree to this, though as I said earlier, they may be blind &/or resistant to this at first blush.)
- Abstract Transcendent Value systems help an individual avoid feeling deeply lost and confused because it gives context and explanation for the world and how one should act in it, absolving the individual from wrestling with trying to figure all that out (assuming they can hang on to their belief strongly enough to avoid doubt). This FEELS GOOD and reduces anxiety.
- Having an ATV makes one feel "safe". Safe FEELS REALLY GOOD - Example thought experiment for an anti-PEer: Consider if your religion/philosophy was established in such a manner that the result of following it would be that you will go to the tortures of hell *forever* ...would you follow it? For instance if your god said to humans "I command you to do this and do that, and as a result you will go to hell." I have challenged Christians with this and after getting them beyond "that's stupid because it would never happen" (I just insist this is a thought experiment, I KNOW it would never happen) then they have agreed with me they wouldn't follow that path. Boom! If this doesn't make the point that feeling good is the ultimate "what it is all about" I don't know what does!

If the above points are made, EP and ATVs end up on level ground with respect to their final goals - EVERYONE is going after a good feeling, in the final analysis.

I think it is then easier to explain that EP in fact does NOT pursue "feeling good" in a foolish or dangerous way, but uses the knowledge of this universal fact about organisms trying to feel good to decide to use wisdom and prudence (things that advanced, thinking beings can do) in order to determine what is really the best way to live a good life. Wisdom and reason and prudence are CENTRAL to living the good life, according to EP. OTOH if you pretend you have no motivation to pursue feeling good, your dishonestly will be leading you astray because you can then follow something that simply isn't true. You won't have a good measuring stick for what is worthwhile to you.