

Welcome Creative Air!

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Hello! I'm David. This is a (very) long introduction about my journey to Epicureanism and why.

I first came across Epicureanism over 20 years ago as I had become disillusioned with Christianity, which was something I was never fully convinced by anyway. I sought, like many when they leave their first religion, a replacement life philosophy or religion to give myself the meaning that I felt I had lost, and Epicureanism along with Stoicism were amongst those which I researched.

Unfortunately, I got sucked into eastern philosophies/religions and became a Buddhist for quite a while as this seemed the most sensible and least supernatural option. But, just like Christianity, I found out that it required belief/faith in supernatural mechanisms such as rebirth and Karma without empirical evidence, which I could never fully bring myself to believe. So, like more Secular Buddhists, I used sophistry, redefinition of terminology, and ignoring of certain teachings, in continuing to delude myself that this wasn't the case.

Once I accepted that I could no longer be a Buddhist and be intellectually honest, I fell onto what I thought was the nearest analogue in the western traditions - Stoicism. Once there I tried to apply the teachings to my own life, and it led me to feeling depressed and stressed as I was tyrannising my self. Also, just like Christianity and Buddhism before, it required that I take Virtue (there doesn't seem to be a clear consensus on what it is) as an objective good and Vice as an objective bad.

I learned that the Stoics of the early and middle Stoa grounded Virtue and Vice in their physics: the Universe/Nature was a complete system of which we were parts. Therefore to act in harmony with the system was Virtue and to not act in harmony/disharmony was Vice. An analogy can be made by using the example of the (organic) body and its cells. If the cells act in harmony with the body they can be considered "good" cells as they benefit and strengthen the body as a whole. Cells that act in disharmony, or do their own thing at the expense of the body, can be considered "bad" or "cancerous". Whilst I can understand this logic, the early to middle Stoics who believed in it had no empirical evidence that this was the case, and I think that Nietzsche was right in his criticism of Stoicism for acting in accordance with whatever concept they projected on to Nature as being what it is, rather than acting according to actual Nature.

The modern Stoics are perhaps even worse, abandoning or at least being agnostic towards this physics as a way of grounding their ethics. Instead it is just taken on faith that Virtue is an objective good and Vice an objective bad, and then using the argument from authority (usually Roman Stoics from the late Stoa, who also abandoned Stoic physics in favour of a focus on ethics, but also modern war heroes such as Admiral Stockdale or historical figures such as

Nelson Mandela) to give it an air of legitimacy to make up for a lack of objective grounding. Either that or applying Aristotelian essentialism where Virtue is acting in accordance with human nature and Vice is acting against human nature (that of being rational and social. But what about emotion, is that not human nature too?). Again, this falls foul of Nietzsche's criticism of projecting beliefs/abstract notions on to Nature, rather than accepting Nature as it is.

So, I abandoned Stoicism also. This was when I revisited Epicureanism, something I knew initially from research years ago and from subsequent diatribes from the Stoic community. I had gotten fed up with my "spiritual" search and realised that I only had one life, this one. I wasn't going to waste it anymore following such sour and austere philosophies. I decided to abandon such intellectual pretense and focus on what matters from a pre-conceptual standpoint. And that was Pleasure and Pain. These were the only things that mattered as they were inherent in us from birth and existed in every sentient (as in being able to feel) being, before any conceptualisation. It was and is something I can point to as universal in the absence of an external objectively grounded ethics/morality. Something that is inherently true regardless of how I felt or thought about it.

Of course, at first I had wrong ideas about Epicurus' teachings, but through further research including on here, my life has transformed and I have become happier and more peaceful. And I'm grateful to all of you as well as the founder and other Epicureans. I realised, for example, that my definition of pleasure and that of modern society is very restrictive - basically sex, drugs and rock n roll. So I expanded this definition to seek pleasure come from all possible sources: whether viewing a beautiful sunset, hearing a baby giggle, or remembering an act of kindness or friendship. I also realised that all pleasure is good and all pain is bad, that there isn't a hierarchy of pleasures, but that some pleasures are worthwhile pursuing and others aren't (they produce pains and disturbances greater than the pleasure they produce). And also that all beings, people included, have pleasure and pain as the ultimate basis of their decision making, even if they may deny it using sophistry.

Among the main objectors to this view of pleasure are the "spiritually" or religiously inclined (at least in theory), those committed to virtue/duty ethics (the aforementioned Stoics), and those who believe in "self sacrifice" and heroism. These conveniently forget that what they ultimately want is a form of reward in terms of a pleasant outcome or avoidance of punishment in the form of a painful outcome. For the spiritual or religious and also for those who follow virtue ethics, this consists either of a more pleasant afterlife/rebirth (in a heavenly realm, or reuniting with the godhead, which is associated with bliss) or the attainment of ultimate peace of mind in this life (apatheia/Ataraxia, Nirvana). Or they want to avoid a hellish afterlife/rebirth or avoid a distressed mind in this life. If this was not the case, or the traditions couldn't sell it, I doubt many of these people would continue these practices. Spiritual attainment is a form of refined pleasure but not discussed as such.

What is taken as evidence of a fatal blow to hedonism, whether of the Cyrenaic (sensual pleasures better than mental pleasures) or Epicurean variety, is that of human self sacrifice or heroism. But, I think this view undervalues the impact of mental pain due to our evolved sense

of conscience/empathy. We identify with other people, whether relatives or friends or social groups (including communities, religious and non-religious, and nations) and we have sympathetic joy when beneficial things happen to them, and sympathetic distress when harmful things happen to them. This also applies to perceived or theoretical benefits/harms. A soldier wants to protect his community from harm and the possibility of harm pains him/her to the point they are willing to put themselves in harms way or even the possibility of death to alleviate it. Also, the sense of pride in doing so brings them pleasure.

A personal example would be me running in front of a car to save my nephew or niece. People may say me doing so would be heroic but in reality I would do it because seeing them harmed or killed pains me so much emotionally that I would rather be harmed/killed myself. I want to see them free from harm and happy. Their being so alleviates me of pain and gives me pleasure, not because of morality but my naturally evolved sense of empathy. Virtue exists in service of pleasure and against pain and is not a good in and of itself. This sense of empathy, along with the knowledge of the security and protection a friendship group gives us that we may lose through untrustworthy/harmful behaviour, and the fear of being detected if we do so, prevents what people would usually call unethical behaviour. And not getting swept up in fears, and unnatural and unnecessary desires, means that we would not have reason to act in those ways anyway, and so we have no need of morality - only of a social contract.

Discovering this philosophy has changed my life for the better, and I welcome Frank criticism of my views (as I still probably have non Epicurean/neo Epicurean beliefs that I'm unaware of and need pointing out to me).

Apologies for the long introduction and again I'm grateful for what all of you do here and the knowledge you impart to continue the Epicurean tradition. Thanks!