

How would you respond to an existentialist who says "You Epicureans have chosen pleasure as your meaning but it's not universal" do Epicureans hold that pleasure is the universal Good?

Post by "Little Rocker" of June 13, 2023 at 11:05 AM

I tend to think Epicurus would respond something like:

Pleasure is the universal motivation, whether the existentialists like it or not. It's a matter of our animal nature. We always act in light of what we take to be most pleasant. (This view is often called 'psychological hedonism').

And yet, humans do not universally accept this truth about our motivations, convincing ourselves we are acting for other reasons because we are prone to false beliefs. So someone can tell themselves all day long they are acting for duty, not pleasure, but that is just a tidy narrative they tell themselves for their own reasons.

As for existentialism, my impression is that there's a sense in which psychological hedonism would not bother many of them, depending on how radically free they consider humans, because Epicurus *does* think we have freedom to choose what is most pleasant. We just don't have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant. So when the existentialists make their existential choices, what they are doing is deliberating about what they consider most pleasant. And that might be enough freedom for many existentialists. If that makes any sense...

I am not, I should say, claiming to be an authority on this matter (especially about existentialism) and it is a contentious question, best addressed, in my opinion, by Raphael Woolf in 'What Kind of Hedonist was Epicurus?'