

Epicurean Philosophy In Relation To Gulags and the Rack

Post by “Cassius” of April 26, 2025 at 2:25 PM

I saw the following posted recently, and the comment about gulags prompts me to use it as an exercise in talking about several ongoing issues. For easy of reading I've placed the original post in separate quote blocks, with my comments following each block. The original, of course, was a single post.

Quote

I'm currently studying Hellenistic philosophy so I've got a decent familiarity with epicureanism and stoicism. The stoics tended to really dislike epicurean ideas, especially the virtues being good for pleasure rather than for their own sake, but their ends look kind of similar in a lot of places if you ignore the semantics (eg am I removing desires because unfilled desires are painful and pain is bad, or because desire comes from the false belief that its object is good?). The idea of the Sage being happy on the rack is common to both philosophies.

I think it's important to emphasize that the Epicureans were not passive, and that the Epicureans were no less vigorous than the Stoics in denouncing their rival school, especially as to the relationship between virtue and pleasure. Both Torquatus in Cicero's "On Ends" and Diogenes of Oinoanda in the inscription on his wall strongly denounce the stoic viewpoint. Most importantly, the Stoics and Epicureans don't end up in the same place as to general removal of desires. Probably its fair to say that the Stoics were against all desire in general other than the desire for virtue, since the stoics held virtue is the only thing in life worth pursuing. But the Epicureans were far calling for the removal of all desires "in general." The only desires that were explicitly ruled out where those which are by nature impossible to fulfill and therefore by nature lead to more pain than pleasure. This paragraph seems to be presuming that all desire is inherently unfulfilled and therefore painful, and that's simply not true, at least from an Epicurean perspective. Epicurus held that life is desirable, and it's not correct to say that we find tomorrow painful, even though we desire to live it if we can do so with more pleasure than pain. As for "happiness," yes it appears that both schools said that it is possible to be "happy" even while on the wrack, but from an Epicurean perspective that doesn't mean that being on the rack is desirable. Stoics are likely to say that they are indifferent to the pain and claim that it should be disregarded for the sake of virtue, while an Epicurean is going to admit the pain, and even cry out in pain, and contemplation of "virtue" is going to be the furthest thing from his mind at the time.

Quote

Yes, Epicurus believed that pleasure is the highest moral good. However, pleasure in the Epicurean view is freedom from pain. Anything else is just a variation of pleasures. Needing to have fancy meals or the like to be happy is antithetical to Epicureanism. You don't need to abstain from nice things, and having those memories is part of how an Epicurean copes with hard times, but you can't rely on them.

This formulation has numerous problems. Yes Epicureans identify “pleasure” as the highest good, but summarizing pleasure as “freedom from pain” with no further explanation leads to the error here of implying that “fancy meals or the like” are “just variations” and are not pleasures themselves and are “antithetical to Epicureanism.” It is correct to say that “*needing*” such pleasures is a problem, and it is correct to say that you should not “rely on them” when they are not available. But isn't it obvious that there's a problem with saying that “memories [of such pleasures] is part of how an Epicurean copes with hard times?” That sounds like we shouldn't be interested in eating tasty food, but it's ok to rely on *memories* of tasty food when times are hard. The basic problem here is that “freedom from pain” is made to sound like something different from pleasure, when in fact *everything* that is not painful is pleasurable when there are only two alternatives, and tasty food is as legitimate a part of the set of total pleasures as is poetry or literature or friendship or anything else. Epicureans don't narrow the definition of pleasure to an ambiguous state of “absence of XXX” - they expand the definition of pleasure to include all experiences of life that are desirable - and life itself is desirable, with the only undesirable experience falling under the name of “pain.”

Quote

In Epicureanism, death is nothing to us since our souls dissipate after leaving the body, so we can't suffer. Similarly, bodily pain is either brief or bearable. Thus we don't need to worry about either of those.

A causal reader of this paragraph might take away that this means that we don't have to worry about when we die or how we die, or when or how we experience pain. That would not be consistent with the thrust of the philosophy. We are always concerned about avoiding experiences involving unnecessary pain, meaning that we always avoid experiences and activities that we cannot justify as bringing us more pleasure in total than pain. The better way to say what is the target here is that we don't have to worry about anything happening to us after we die, and we don't have to worry about pain in life being unmanageable and impossible to escape. Pains that are long but not intense can be managed; pains which are intense and cannot be alleviated can be escaped by death. But there are many situations in life where you don't want have to go through the process of making that calculation in real time, and “worrying” about those situations (meaning devoting your thoughts to how to act to avoid those situations) is perfectly appropriate.

Quote

An epicurean alleviates irrational fears of the unknown and of death or pain by understanding that they can't actually hurt them. It's pretty similar to how death to stoics is a dispreferred indifferent.

This statement has the same problem as the prior paragraph. Yes indeed pain can actually hurt us, and depending on the timing and how it occurs, the process of dying can hurt us too. The Epicurean is going identify and dismiss *irrational* fear of death and pain, but he will also devote all the vigor of mind and body that he can muster to avoiding the very many real dangers that can in fact bring death and pain.

Quote

From the perspective of an Epicurean, having good friends and forming memories with them means when you are suffering, those memories will be there to comfort you. If you are in a gulag, you can overcome your bodily suffering by thinking about your friends and your pleasant memories.

This sentence: *"If you are in a gulag, you can overcome your bodily suffering by thinking about your friends and your pleasant memories."* is what motivated me to write this post.

Yes, if you wrap that last sentence in a lot of context and parse it carefully, there are certainly aspects of this that are true. But without that context and explanation, it's the worst kind of characterization of Epicurean philosophy.

First, "overcome" is not the correct word at all. The reference to being "in a gulag" epitomizes the modern "passive" approach to philosophy in general and Epicurus in particular. The entire purpose of Epicurean philosophy is to avoid "being in a gulag" in the first place, and if you approach everything in life from the point of view of "maybe I'll happen to find myself in XXXXX" then that's the best way to end up being there. As with Epicurus on his last day, you can offset mental pleasures against bodily pains, but those mental pleasures aren't going to make the bodily pains go away. Stoicism has planted in the minds of many people that it is in fact possible for the mind to override the real world - since nothing else matters to them but "virtue," it makes sense to say that pain is irrelevant, no matter how intense. That's what most people see as the insufferable arrogance and unreality of Stoicism. But the opposite of insufferable arrogance and unreality is not "I'm happy-go-lucky and I'll take whatever comes my way because I have a lot of stored up memories of ice cream and cake to offset against the tortures of the gulag."

Quote

TLDR In epicureanism, pleasure doesn't mean "I'm enjoying eating this caviar" it's freedom from pain and worry—ataraxia/tranquility is specifically

about having no mental pain because that's easier to control. Epicureanism supposedly teaches you how to be free from mental pain even in the worst circumstances.

No doubt the “supposedly” is included here because the writer sees the weakness of his argument. Epicurean philosophy cannot teach you to be “free” from mental pain “even in the worst circumstances,” but that is the trap that people get into when they take “absence of pain” to be the real goal of Epicurean philosophy.

No one in real life is ever completely free from mental pain, and if we think Epicurus was realistic then that is not what he could have meant the “absence of pain” discussion to mean. When you get past superficial readings of the letter to Menoecus, there’s plenty of textual evidence that explains that Epicurus held there to be only two feelings, and that means - just as stated in Principal Doctrine 3, that when pain is absent then pleasure is present, and the reverse also.

While it is proper to state the “goal of life” in terms of absolute pleasure from which pain is absent, no person in real life is completely free of all mental and physical pain at any particular moment. And it hardly needs to be said that death (which is the only time when *all* pain is gone) is certainly not a pleasure.

The total elimination of all mental and physical pain from our lives is a very explicit and useful statement of the Epicurean goal. However Epicurus is nothing if not practical, and Epicurus does not make the perfect the enemy of the good. Every person’s circumstances are different, and because of those differences the highest and practical good cannot be stated more precisely and universally than maximum pleasure and minimum pain, or as Cicero stated in regard to Clodius, sarcastically but accurately, “nothing is preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.” (The Latin is “nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus.” Cicero, In defense Of Publius Sestius, 10.23)

Nothing can be better than a life full of pleasures combined with no disturbances of any kind, but for us this means that at times we will choose pain, when that choice avoids worse pain or brings more pleasure than pain. Epicurus would never have advised the choice of pain - even for a moment - if he had expected “absence of pain” to be applied rigidly or hyperlogically as the true goal of life. The true Epicurean goal is to do the best we can to achieve a happy life through the predominance of pleasure over pain. Identifying that properly and working to achieve it realistically requires both dismissing Stoic pretensions to “virtue” as well avoiding well-meaning but misguided attempts to reconcile Epicurus with Stoicism, Buddhism, and other philosophies of passivity and detachment.