

How Would You Answer Someone New Who Asked You: "What Is Epicurean Philosophy All About?"

Post by "Cassius" of September 1, 2019 at 8:09 AM

This is Elayne's outstanding post for a first answer:

Great question! For me, I would say it is a reality-based philosophy which advises us to observe and understand nature so that we may learn how to make decisions to maximize our own pleasure.

I would tell them that we interact with reality by 3 means: our senses (and instruments which extend those); our evolved pattern recognitions (which IMO form a historical encoding of our species' interactions with reality), such as our innate sense of justice; and our individual feelings of pain and pleasure. We also have the tool of reason, but reason and logic must always be based on real information and are not a method of encountering reality but only of interpreting it.

I would note to the person that through these ways of studying reality, we have determined that there is no supernatural realm, that life ends at death, that future events are not predetermined but probabilistic, that there is no absolute morality or ethics, and that the natural way animals achieve health and survival is to choose actions that cause pleasure and avoid those that cause pain. And that because humans have advanced cognitive capacity, we are able to consider the effects of our actions on our future pain and pleasure, not just the moment, and we can thus choose for net pleasure. That happiness is made of pleasure and nothing else. That observation teaches us humans are not naturally insatiable but can enjoy satisfied pleasure from activities like eating until full. That we can take pleasure in memories, in current enjoyment, and in hope for the future. This requires freedom from delusional fears and a belief in agency, that we can influence our own lives.

I would say that while most of us share species level pleasure from activities like friendship, freedom, food when hungry, and sleep when tired, there is wide variation of individual preference. And since reality is partly encountered subjectively, through our personal feelings, we do not find that other people can effectively choose for our pleasure or we for theirs. However, for most of us, there will be certain beloved others whose pleasure is bound up in ours, so that if they are in pain we will be also, and if they are happy, we will have a share in that too. These are our friends, and we will be wise to choose them carefully.

I would say to this person that to practice EP, they need to closely plan and observe the results of their actions-- does the action bring net pleasure or pain? And learn constantly, to improve the outcomes of future choices.

I would then give them examples from my own life. If I knew them well enough, I'd tell them some specific significant difficulties I have encountered and how I navigated those. Today, I make my daily schedule with the aim of net pleasure, which means some activities won't be pleasurable at the time but will be needed for future pleasure, and others will be pleasurable today and later.

For instance, today I am about to take a hike in the woods--current and future pleasure from health and memories-- and from being ready to start section hiking the AT next spring. I will do the Skype call with admins and then with group members to discuss DeWitt-- current and future pleasures of friendship. I will enjoy my meals, having chosen food that tastes good and gives my body what is needed for health. One of those meals I'll be cooking for my son and a friend, for our Sunday lunch, and then we will watch Doctor Who together. This gives me pleasure from cooking, eating, and seeing people I love enjoy my cooking! We will have some lovely hugs and laughter. I also have on my list laundry-- not especially fun, but I'll have the pleasure of clean clothes-- and completing some paperwork for a job I'm doing in November-- boring paperwork but for a job that will be enjoyable and that will give me funds for travel and living expenses. I'll enjoy reading before bed, and listening to music. I'll go to sleep at a time which allows my brain to get enough deep sleep, so that I can enjoy tomorrow.