

Episode Thirty - Only A Limited Number of Combinations of Atoms Is Possible

Post by "Don" of August 10, 2020 at 11:27 PM

Being that [Elayne](#) took the time to compose her reply, I want to respond in kind as thoughtfully and respectfully as possible.

Quote

I disagree with Don that it is inferior if a scientist makes pleasure primarily out of doing research, vs some broader collection of pleasures. **If that is the most reliable pleasure for the scientist, why wouldn't she choose it?** "Moment-by-moment" pleasures can create an overall pleasurable life.

To be clear, I think it's neither inferior nor superior to any other pleasure. If their research gives them a "reliable pleasure", they should, by all means, choose it. And I agree that momentary pleasures can add up to long-term pleasures. My unease was that, in the podcast episode, I interpreted it as if this one activity - scientific research - was all-encompassing. I don't think you can judge someone's well-being on one activity. It seems I may have interpreted this incorrectly, and that the idea being advocated for was a scientific outlook on life.

Quote

I do not think comparing science and profligacy makes sense-- they are nowhere near the same. But I have an implicit assumption here which I need to make clear-- I am talking about a real scientist, one who understands the use of evidence the same way Epicurus did-- because that is science.

Please don't think I was equating science and profligacy. That was not my intention, and I apologize if that's what came across! My only intention in citing PD 10 and the *Letter to Menoikos* was the idea of singling out momentary pleasures without an eye to the sustained pleasures of a pleasurable life overall. I think [Cassius](#) and [Martin](#) addressed this in Episode 31 when they were talking about Polyaeus concentrating on *just* geometry before coming to Epicurus. Polyaeus - arguably - "broadened his horizons" and realized there was more to life than geometry although he didn't abandon his studies. He merely broadened his interests and integrated geometry into a broader study of nature. Again, my concern in bringing up PD 10 was concentrating on one kind of pleasure - the pursuit of scientific research in this case - and, as I mentioned above, I may have misinterpreted what was being conveyed.

Quote

Such a person would not have supernatural fears or be prone to non-evidence based contagious social ideas in the first place, because of having a scientific approach. That is the person's immunity to being dragged off track away from pleasure.

Now, we're getting to the idea that [Martin](#) so nicely put it in Episode 31 in talking about **implicit** vs **explicit** philosophies of life...

Quote

My scientist was not really hypothetical. My dad is a retired physicist and my mother was a mathematician. I never knew anyone who only did science, lol, but I grew up surrounded by scientists and their families, and they were among the happiest (meaning, for me, experiencing sustained pleasure) people I knew. They were not beset by superstition... but they were not explicitly philosophers either. Many of them spent long waking hours pursuing their research projects. They all had families whom they enjoyed spending time with as well, and like my dad, they often spent family time teaching their children about science. Some of my most pleasurable memories involve my dad teaching me physics, from early childhood. It was a central pleasure, which seems to me very similar to Epicurus' instructions about studying nature with friends.

I observe that **if a person is securely absent supernatural beliefs, they often tend to intuitively do the hedonic calculus**, and they are often quite skilled **without a sense that they have a philosophy**. And if they have lived a long life making wise choices but have not formally written down or thought out a philosophy, I am very resistant to saying their happy lives were just due to blind luck. No-- they were happy due to their understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure).

"...without a sense that they have a philosophy..." From my understanding, this is exactly what [Martin](#) was saying about implicit and explicit philosophies. Everyone has a "philosophy of life" whether they express it that way or not. We all operate under certain paradigms, and I don't think "blind luck" has much to do with it. Although some people **do** operate that way, careening from drama to drama, highs to lows to highs to lows, with no underpinning framework.

I firmly believe that you don't have to formally acknowledge your "philosophy" - or even think through the ramifications of it - to have a "philosophy." That would be an implicit philosophy, one you don't give much thought to but which has grown up around you, within you, and with which you make decisions in your life. One's *"understanding of the scientific process and their natural ability to choose pleasure (including sometimes experiencing pain for greater pleasure)"* **is** their *philosophy of life*. As [Godfrey](#) said in an earlier post, Epicurus did not necessarily create the Canon or his Philosophy. It was a natural process which he examined, codified, and refined to make it easier for people to study and to make practical use of. That's not saying

some don't stumble across it as a natural process. I would say it's even probably more likely that some will make use of Epicurean ideas *sans Epicureanism* in our modern secular society. Our modern scientific worldview owes a debt to Epicurus and Lucretius after all!

Quote

As an adult, I have met non-scientist atheists who understood just enough about science to feel secure in rejecting un-evidenced notions and social fads, and I have observed that these people, over time, develop great skill in choosing pleasure-- **but they are not philosophers.** This evidence, right in front of me, prevents me from making assertions that someone must have a philosophy to wisely choose a pleasurable life.

Epicurus was able to develop his philosophy because it (IMO) is the only one you can have if you are a scientist and pay attention to reality. No other philosophy holds up at all, under scrutiny.

"...but they are not philosophers..." That is exactly my point! 😊 You don't have to be a capital-P Philosopher to have a "philosophy of life," an in-grained operating system, if you will, by which you make decisions about our life. And, again, Epicurus was observing Nature, how it worked, and examining it then teaching others to *consciously* apply what he observed and learned instead of having to make it up as they went along.

Quote

I am extremely glad I found Epicurus-- but I was also already practicing the philosophy without calling it one, and it was functioning well.

Exactly!! You were practicing the "philosophy" before you were practicing the Philosophy! I really think [Godfrey](#) really hit on something with...

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Epicurus didn't invent the Canon, he observed and articulated it. It's a natural process involving pleasure.

We can implicitly be "practicing Epicureans" without knowing that's what we're doing! And that may be enough for some people, but I still maintain that it's better to examine your philosophy of life explicitly to see where it's working, where it's not, and to see if there are others - either ancients or moderns, whether they be philosophers or other thinkers - who have worked out the kinks so to speak so you don't have to! It's not a requirement, but I think it can lead to a wider perspective and a deeper understanding of why you do what you do and how to do it better, more efficiently, and with more wisdom (It's a **philosophy**, after all).

Quote

As far as obstacles go, for me they have not been alternative philosophies and superstitions but normal griefs of life-- which I feel fully when they come up. I am not afraid of my feelings, and similar to Epicurus I would say that the most severe griefs do not last in their most intense form very long, and the milder griefs are not difficult to cope with, when one focuses on activities that bring pleasure-- for me, the main antidote to grief is social pleasures. Hugging my friends and family, singing together, eating and talking together, etc. I have had many griefs in life, and that is what has worked for me-- I don't tend to philosophize about grief. Often pleasure is strong even after losses, when I think about how fortunate I was to have known and loved the person who is now gone, and take time to remember them. I find pleasure in the sensation of poignancy and nostalgia.

[Elayne](#) , I thought this was eloquent and poignant, and I couldn't agree more! For myself, I have found that one of the best ways of dealing with grief - especially at funerals - is to embrace the celebration of the person's life. The loss is felt - and felt deeply - but I agree with Epicurus when he says that we need to take pleasure in memories for what was. I felt this way before I found Epicurus, too!

I think we're getting hung up on the word "philosophize." Your "philosophy" about grief comes through loudly, beautifully, and eloquently here, and it is a full, rich philosophy.

Quote

What I'm wondering if I hear in Don's words-- and maybe not, [Don](#) -- please correct me if I'm wrong-- is an implication that pleasures must not just be sustained but somehow of a superior type, perhaps what I call a "meaning project", and I disagree with that. Some people do require a meaning project for pleasure, but not everyone does. It is a matter of temperament and likely neurology. But I strongly disagree that there are inferior and superior pleasures, if the pleasures are truly equivalent in their fullness. There are no trivial vs important pleasures. That is idealism and abstract thinking creeping in. Then you wind up with people saying things like "we should not try to have pleasure but meaningfulness"-- but what is meaningfulness without pleasure? What is beauty? Why would anyone want any of these things without the pleasure in them?

No, I do not think some pleasures are of a "superior" type. And I don't think there is any "meaning" to life - other than to live a sustained, pleasurable life while we are living. There is no Ultimate Meaning. We are atoms and void in this particular arrangement for a finite time. There is no meaning imposed by some supernatural being. Those who try to say their life has "meaning" - I think - are confusing it with well-being, satisfaction, ... dare I say pleasure.

I do not think there are superior and inferior pleasures. I *do* think there are positive and negative choices leading to more or less pain and/or pleasure. That's why I feel we can say the

profligate who over-indulge in drinking, drugs, sex, etc., are not making "good" (not in a Platonic sense) decisions for themselves. That way does NOT lead to sustained pleasurable lives. A chilled glass of wine in the shade on a warm, summer day can be enjoyed with pleasure. Four bottles of whiskey imbibed in the street on a cold winter night may have brought pleasure for a short time, but it will NOT lead to a sustained pleasurable life.

And I don't think there are trivial or important pleasures. There may be simple vs complex pleasures, but I don't think that's the same thing. As a matter of fact, I can walk through the woods, look up, and feel a wash of simple pleasure as I take in the delicate verdant patterns of sunlight through the leaves. I can take pleasure or satisfaction from completing a complex task with many steps.

Quote

It is quite possible to intuitively understand and practice this without ever being a philosopher, and I've seen it done and don't even think it is extraordinarily rare. We don't see those folks on our philosophy forums, because they probably don't even know it is a thing, but they are out there enjoying life.

No argument there! 😊 We may be having a semantic argument over definitions in the end. In many ways, we are ALL philosophers in that we will intuitively have some kind of "philosophy" to live by, that's one's "implicit" philosophy or as Cambridge defines it: [the way that someone thinks about life and deals with it](#). I still maintain that examining one's small-p philosophy and making it an extrinsic philosophy is valuable rather than making it up as you go along. It can ground you. It can provide a broader context. It can be an eye-opening experience. But it's not necessary. One can go about one's life with one's own personal "way that [one] thinks about life and deals with it." But, over the millennia, many people have given many different ways of life a lot of thought. One doesn't have to be a Lone Ranger.