

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 1, 2019 at 8:08 AM

If you met someone who asked you to explain to them what Epicurean Philosophy is about, how would you introduce them to it, and what are some examples of how it can be applied in everyday life?

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.

Post by “Cassius” of September 1, 2019 at 8:28 AM

I agree with everything that Elayne wrote, and she's provided a great general answer that should be good for most anyone.

If you happen to know something about the person who is asking the question, you can attempt to be sure to cover more specific aspects of the philosophy that might interest them.

For example, if they are acutely interested in religious issues, then it is good to mention that Epicurean philosophy was one of the major viewpoints that was popular before the take-over of Judeo Christian religion. Such a person would be interested to know that Epicurus taught that there is no life, and no punishment or reward, after death, and that any "gods" that exist are not as we are taught, but did not create or control this earth and do not punish or reward humans for their actions.

If they are interested in nature or physics, it would would good to mention that Epicurus was one of the first leading teachers that the universe is made of combinations of particles that interact naturally without any supernatural forces; and that both regularity in the actions of bodies exist along with "swerving" of elemental particles as science observes today.

If they are interested in astronomy / space travel / science "fiction" they would be interested to know that Epicurus taught that life does not exist just here on earth, but throughout the universe as a whole; that the universe is boundless in size and eternal in time, and that the earth is not the center of the universe.

If they are interested in philosophy in general, or history, it would be good for them to know that Epicurus was a rebel against Plato and most prior (and following) schools of Greek philosophy. They would be interested to know that Epicurus warned against the misuse of dialectical logic, and even against the misuse of math and geometry to claim that there are mysterious forces (implicitly supernatural) "behind" the reality of the universe.

If they are interested in government and society they will be interested to know that Epicurus taught that there is no absolute justice or absolute morality, and that many important people over the centuries from Thomas Jefferson to Karl Marx to Frederik Nietzsche to the English Utilitarians studied Epicurus' views on that area.

If they are Americans and interested in American history, you can point out to them that they probably didn't know that Thomas Jefferson called himself an Epicurean, and that he was friends with a woman (Frances Wright, who visited him at Monticello) who published one of the best summaries of major points of Epicurean philosophy in hundreds of years.

So there's a lot you can do if you know something about the person you are talking to.

And as a final comment, we do have the example of Lucretius to consult, because his poem is essentially one long presentation of the philosophy to someone who previously did not know the details.

Post by “Joshua” of September 1, 2019 at 10:28 AM

A Christian once defined his religion to me thus;

Salvation;

By Grace alone,

Through Faith alone,

In Christ alone.

Brevity invites problems, as we well know. But were I to aim for that level of terseness it would go something like this:

Happiness;

In just one natural life--

In one uncreated, everlasting

And endless cosmos--

Through pleasure, friendship,

And fearless inquiry

Into the nature of things.

Post by “Joshua” of September 1, 2019 at 10:39 AM

As for Elayne's post; well, I sighed with comfort just reading it! The kind of sigh that comes from walking into a light, airy and well-ordered room.

My friend is section hiking the Superior Hiking Trail in Minnesota. He'll be tackling the AT one of these years, I have no doubt. Me...well, I'll stick to reading Bill Bryson for now!