

Exchange With A Stoic (Donald Robertson) on "Engagement" and Pleasure vs. Virtue

Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2019 at 8:43 AM

[The following is a transcript of a Facebook exchange:](#)

Cassius: Donald Robertson just submitted the post in the graphic below, which is valuable for people to see, but in keeping with the principles of the group I want to point out in intro that his post does not represent common ground between Stoics and Epicureans, but illustrates the opposite. If you don't know of Don you should know that he is probably "the" recognized leader of "Modern Stoicism" and he has posted here before, always cordially, and most of the time (if I recall) agreeing as to the differences -- he just maintains that the Stoic position is correct and the Epicurean incorrect.

There are divisions within modern stoicism as to the importance of issues that come down to "religion," with some Stoics holding that these can be glossed over for the sake of therapy, and some being more rigorous in accurately following the ancient stoics.

In posting this, we're not inviting an intramural debate within the Stoics as to what "true stoicism" means, but it cannot be emphasized often enough that Stoicism is based on "virtue as the goal" and Epicurean philosophy makes virtue instrumental to "pleasure as the goal." And going over that again makes this post highly useful.

I am also attaching a clip from Dugald Stewart, which is referenced in Don's quote. Stewart's quote helps illustrate (with my red underlining) these differences.

Some are going to say that we plow this ground too often. My response is that we hardly do it often enough, because there is very very little more important than understanding how divergent these goals are. One might say that issues of "life after death" or "supernatural gods" are more important, but all of these issues are wrapped together in the birth of Stoicism, and unless you untangle the issue that there is NOTHING of "intrinsic value" other than what Nature reveals to us through pleasure, then you'll never understand the Epicurean position.

So when we get a chance to discuss this with Donald Robertson, I think we should take it.

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CA:

Reminder: Let's please restrict discussion here to the differences between Stoics and Epicureans, and to the extent humanly possible let's not have a debate here among Stoics as to what "true stoicism" really means or needs to be in the modern world. That would simply take us too far off track.

The issues involved in this post are deeply intertwined with Elayne's recent post on "The War on Eudaimonia" so if you missed that one, this would be good time to check it out, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/EpicureanPhilosophy/permalink/2450542458328033/>

Other references: Diogenes of Oinoanda:

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Torquatus, the Epicuran spokesman in Cicero's "On Ends" -

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Dugald Stewart is essentially arguing that the Stoic view results in a happiness of another kind, rather than one based on pleasure. We discussed that at length in this related thread as well: [Pleasure vs Happiness \(?\) Discussion of Hiram's "In Defense of Eudaimonia"](#)

Donald Robertson:

Q1: So are you saying that wisdom (the virtue) is merely of instrumental value as a means of achieving pleasure? And that wisdom is therefore of no intrinsic value whatsoever as an end in itself?

Cassius:

Cassius Amicus: That is EXACTLY what we are saying Donald! 😊

Donald Robertson:

That's normally a sticking point for many people, throughout history, who have found it counter-intuitive to say they would desire pleasure even at the expense of wisdom, self-awareness, or knowledge, etc. It leads to well-known dilemmas such as whether you would choose to be totally deceived/deluded about the most important things in life as long as that experience felt more pleasurable than knowing the truth.

Elayne:

Those hypotheticals don't tend to present themselves in real life, which is what we focus on. Not "brain in a vat" scenarios that don't exist. In real life, wisdom and knowledge increase your chances of pleasure ☐☐

Donald Robertson:

Elayne Coulter The reason people (very commonly, e.g., in every philosophy seminar) use hypotheticals is to clarify scenarios that actually do arise in real life but in a more complex, harder to explain form, though, that would be more time-consuming and confusing to discuss (especially on the Internet). It's just a way of simplifying questions that arise in daily life so that we can evaluate the issues at stake more clearly.

Elayne Coulter:

Donald Robertson, however when you say a person could choose to be "totally deceived/deluded about the most important things in life" as long as this was more pleasurable-- I cannot think of ever having seen this situation in real life. This sounds so unlikely. Are they really "totally deluded", and if so how could they choose this delusion-- wouldn't they have to know the truth to be aware of choosing a delusion? I would need to know the specifics-- what are the things being called most important, and most important according to whom, etc. Real questions are actually easier to discuss, IMO. The "devil is in the details." It's turning real situations into abstract quizzes that creates confusion. Philosophy is of no use if it can't be applied to real life.

I am too much of a pragmatist to be interested in hypotheticals when there are so many fascinating real life situations to consider.

Did you know that trolley problems are more easily solved in a social utilitarian way by people with sociopathic traits? They find it easier to turn humans into numbers.

Just because philosophy classes proceed this way doesn't make it useful for living. ☐☐

<http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/PDF/Ba...Mk-f6tW8akuAL7U>

Donald Robertson:

Hmmm.... I don't think I've to the time to get into the weeds of specific examples and have a back and forth about them, though. That's going to be kind of limiting for you in terms of discussing philosophical problems on the Internet. You'll need to find people able to invest a lot more time in the conversations.

Elayne Coulter:

Donald Robertson, that's a benefit (among others) of having friends, who take the time needed! Planning for a pleasurable life is itself a pleasure, so when a like-minded person understands this, they enjoy "investing" the time in conversation. And because the topic is real, these

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1248-exchange-with-a-stoic-donald-robertson-on-engagement-and-pleasure-vs-virtue/>

discussions lead to real choices for pleasure. Win-win!

Cassius Amicus:

Further from Torquatus, the Epicurean spokesman, on "wisdom":

XIII. Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science, but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure. (The meaning that I attach to pleasure must by this time be clear to you, and you must not be biased against my argument owing to the discreditable associations of the term.)

The great disturbing factor in a man's life is ignorance of good and evil; mistaken ideas about these frequently rob us of our greatest pleasures, and torment us with the most cruel pain of mind. Hence we need the aid of Wisdom, to rid us of our fears and appetites, to root out all our errors and prejudices, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment of pleasure. Wisdom alone can banish sorrow from our hearts and protect its front alarm and apprehension; put yourself to school with her, and you may live in peace, and quench the glowing flames of desire. For the desires are incapable of satisfaction; they ruin not individuals only but whole families, nay often shake the very foundations of the state. It is they that are the source of hatred, quarreling, and strife, of sedition and of war.

Nor do they only flaunt themselves abroad, or turn their blind onslaughts solely against others; even when prisoned within the heart they quarrel and fall out among themselves; and this cannot but render the whole of life embittered. Hence only the Wise Man, who prunes away all the rank growth of vanity and error, can possibly live untroubled by sorrow and by fear, content within the bounds that nature has set. Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus's doctrine as to the different classes of the desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.

XIV. If then we observe that ignorance and error reduce the whole of life to confusion, while Wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of appetite and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and to peace, why should we hesitate to avow that Wisdom is to be

desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and Folly to be avoided because of its injurious consequences?

Donald Robertson:

Q2: Does that mean an Epicurean would, in principle, be willing to sacrifice wisdom completely for the sake of attaining pleasure if it turned out to be more expedient to do so? (For instance if a drug or piece of technology became available that made us stupid but happy.)

Cassius:

Not "in principle" but in actuality, because "wisdom" (just like any other virtue) has no usefulness unless it bring pleasure. The fundamental principles is that NOTHING has intrinsic value -- nothing is desirable in and of itself - other than the feeling of pleasure, which embraces every desirable mental and physical experience in human life.

Also on the issue of sacrificing one value for another:

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Donald Robertson:

Q3: Would an Epicurean consider it more desirable to live in a world populated entirely by other people who pursue their own pleasure at all costs, as the supreme good in life, rather than a society composed of individuals who embrace wisdom and justice as ends in themselves?

Rich Casada III:

Donald Robertson I can't speak for other Epicureans, but I am deeply skeptical of anyone who claims he is embracing wisdom and justice as ends in themselves. Although this sounds innocuous enough at face value, I believe this comes with an entire package of dogma attached to it. Dogma that, often enough, leads to a lot of graves.

Instead, when people prioritize long term goals to maximize pleasure of themselves and their families/communities, this tends to be a fairly undogmatic perspective that doesn't result in gulags or inquisitions.

I don't often trust other people's sense of absolute wisdom or justice.

Cassius Amicus -

Rich Casada III Only quibble I have with your formulation is that I would strike "don't often" and replace it with "never" since, as Epicurus held, "absolute" wisdom and justice do not exist - and therefore claiming to possess it is guarantee of error. Otherwise an outstanding post 😊

Andy Tribble

Donald Robertson I sometimes reformulate this question as 'who would you like as your neighbour: a Stoic or an Epicurean'?

It seems clear that a Stoic would be more likely to return your lawn mower, on principles of justice, and will refrain from late-night partying.

But the solution lies in the 18th century extension of Epicureanism into Utilitarianism. Your description of the Epicurean is of people who pursue their OWN pleasure at all costs. However it's possible to conceive of a system in which people recognise the equal right of OTHER people to pursue their own happiness. Phrases like 'the sum total of human happiness' apply.

As a result, you can assess the value of an action, both trivial and serious, against the measure: 'does this add to the sum total of human happiness'? This formulation is a way to reconcile the pursuit of happiness with justice towards other people.

I agree that it would be unpleasant to live in a world populated by 'selfish' epicureans.

But it seems to me that a world of people who recognise the EQUAL rights of other people to their own happiness, might be a good place to live.

Martin Huehne"

Andy Tribble : This is where Utilitarians deviate from Epicurus.

For those who are not yet fully into EP, it is difficult to overcome a feeling of undue selfishness in pleasure because about all other philosophies and the religions frown upon giving priority to pleasure.

However, there are no selfish Epicureans because selfishness is automatically avoided in EP in 2 complementary ways: By trusting our feelings, in particular empathy and acting accordingly, and by applying reason through hedonic calculus.

Those who claim that their Epicurean friend or partner is selfish more often have their own selfish agenda to impose on the friend or partner than that the friend or partner made gross mistakes in the hedonic calculus.

Considering others' desire for pleasure is part of the hedonic calculus. But explicitly maximizing pleasure for the largest number as in Utilitarianism is imposing and ignores the individual differences regarding what is pleasure.

Cassius:

(To DR's question) Now you are proceeding far into the world of hypotheticals which cannot be addressed without filling in proper details, which is a point that Epicurus specifically raised himself. The bottom line always remains that pleasure is the only thing desirable in itself, and so all circumstances have to be judged by "what will happen if this course is chosen." And in a world without "fate," where humans have agency in themselves, as Epicurus said, it is not possible to predict with certainty without looking to specifics.

Elayne Coulter:

This idea that an Epicurean is a deserter from family and community is ridiculous. I suppose there may be some extreme introverts who could not lead a life of pleasure in the company of others, but that doesn't seem to be the usual.

The greatest part of my pleasure is in friendship. I am active in my community and state because it's a natural pleasure-- not because of a sense of duty. The joy of others produces joy in me, spontaneously-- I don't need some set of weird rules, lol.

I'm staying with family out of state for a month while I learn a new procedure. Last night I enjoyed cooking for my brother and sister in law, and helping entertain my 6 month old niece. Pure enjoyment!

The things I have done socially, even when hard appearing from the outside, have been my pleasures. Raising my children. Spending my career caring mainly for low income children as a pediatrician, and later caring for their own children as my "grandpatients." Teaching medical students. Advocating for improvements in services, being on various local and state boards, doing volunteer work, talking to legislators to pass bills -- I find these things enjoyable at the time and later I can enjoy the results also. Generosity is a great intrinsic pleasure.

We don't discuss current politics in the large group because it tends to derail people from our subject-- however, there have been things I've done and am doing politically and professionally, for the sake of particular freedoms necessary for my own pleasure and that of others in my community which are dangerous and require courage. Even to the point of receiving death threats. However, shrinking back in fear causes more pain, so I choose the actions necessary for pleasure despite the risk.

Standing up for pleasure and spreading the message as we are taking time to do-- what kind of deserter is that, [Donald Robertson](#), lol!?

None of these people I enjoy doing things for are abstract. They are real humans whom I love, whose pleasure is tightly bound to mine. That's the normal thing for an Epicurean.

There is a similar ridiculous article out there saying one will know the difference between a Stoic and an Epicurean "on the rack", as if an Epicurean could imagine betraying others under torture! On the contrary, the spontaneous desire of an Epicurean is for pleasure, and that would be forever lost at the knowledge of having betrayed someone who had not harmed us. Not

because of rules-- because of natural empathy.

I feel sorry for people who feel they need a set of virtues to be kind to people in their communities. They must not be enjoying the pleasure of empathy.

Andy Tribble:

Elayne Coulter I had a similar conversation with my other half this very morning. I apologised for being bad company as I have a cold. She said "I'll stick with you" and I said "please don't, the last thing I want is someone staying with me because they think they should". We agreed that, even with a sore head, I was probably still just in credit on the pleasure/pain scale, so she'd stay. I really don't want to be someone's Duty! ☹

Cassius Amicus:

Within a subthread here Donald Robertson wrote " It [choosing pleasure above 'wisdom'] leads to well-known dilemmas such as whether you would choose to be totally deceived/deluded about the most important things in life as long as that experience felt more pleasurable than knowing the truth."

This is about the point where these discussions usually break down, because there appears to be no resolution other than "I disagree" but I want to point out something important:

Donald writes as if "wisdom" is something that has a firm, even an absolute, definition. But just like Pontius Pilate asked "What is truth?" we have to ask "What is wisdom?" Apparently Donald thinks he knows what he is, and that using it he can determine what are "the most important things in life" which he values more highly than living pleurably.

And here's the real point: "Who gets to decide, and on what basis?" Do the Stoics or the Academics or the Peripatetics have access to some "higher" point of reference from which they can tell what "wisdom" or "truth" really are? As [Rich Casada III](#) observed earlier in the thread, we need to be "deeply skeptical of anyone who claims he is embracing wisdom and justice as ends in themselves," and the reason we need to do so is that "their" version of wisdom and justice may not be what we agree that it is, and may come at our expense.

The Stoic position is essentially theocratic, absolutist, and is based on the same kind of thought process that leads, again as Rich said, to a lot of graves. It is essentially the thought process of an ISIS or an Al Qaeda, which I cite here not to criticize ISIS / Al Qaeda or smear the name of Stoicism, but to point out in dramatic terms that anyone who claims access to a higher truth, if consistent, will admit to no limitations on what it takes to implement that higher truth.

In an Epicurean universe no such claims are possible. There is nothing supernatural or not composed of matter and void, so there are no absolutist gods or "ideals" which anyone can claim as justification for their particular point of view. In such a world, WE the individual people, unwashed and unhomogenized by the ivory halls of the Cambridges of the world, get to decide how to live our own lives, and what makes us the happiest.

That's what is at stake in Stoicism and Platonism and Aristotelianism and every other form of absolutist supernatural philosophy, no less and no different even though their names may be more high-sounding than ISIS and Al Qaeda.

And to repeat for emphasis, I am not here criticizing ISIS and Al Qaeda, or the Platonists or Aristotelians or Stoics, for working to promote their own view of happiness. If I were one of them, I would promote my own view of pleasure as well, and I endorse that pursuing our own happiness is what Nature calls us to do. I am just saying be careful what you endorse, and the reasoning behind it. Do not be beguiled by the glamour of the high-sounding words.

To end by quoting Torquatus again: "Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable?"

Elli Pensa:

I do not know how the stoics can speak for feelings of empathy, when their teachers have already proposed and indicated to them how to be followers of that road that leads to Apathy, Duty, Fate, and the goal of Virtue? We speak for the total blindness of the robot machines.

"The stoic who knows physics, Christina Kourfali writes in her book "Stoic art of life", perceives himself as part of a wider whole. This knowledge and its reflection steadily takes us away from a purely selfish view...".

"What are you? Epictetus asks. Human. (...) If you see yourself as a human and as part of a whole, that all requires once to be sick, the other to travel to the sea and risk, the other to find yourself in need and to die before your time. So why do you begrudge? Don't you know that the leg, if it is detached, will no longer be a leg, so you will no longer be a human?"

Here is how physics gives the mark of the stoic morality: With the blind trust in providence. And the human is a participant. This is how the concept of "sympathy" results, which is being imported first and uniquely by the stoics. From this, the concept of duty draws its origin. Let us consider here the ways in which the duty is cultivated opposite to the collaborative concepts, the homeland, the church, the party, the team, or the persons in power.

"The stoic acts", as opposed to the epicureans, as Pierre Hadot points out, "not for his own personal or even spiritual benefit, but in a selfless way, at the service of the human

community.”

“No school has more kindness and sweetness, more love for people, more interest for the common good...”, the stoic Seneca gloats.

Festugiere writes that for the stoics “everything is summed up in the acceptance of the Order or - which is finally the same - of Destiny. This is the only one which counts. Everything else, health and disease, wealth and poverty, people’s praise and disdain, are all indifferent”.

“Desire things to be as they are and not as you wish to be”. Epictetus here as well. This is a top sample of the masterful art of life, as it is said, very close to palliative practices and overtly oriental cunning. Leave it, he tells you, it is arranged by the providence, which knows before you. The best thing is to understand that you are part of it and to accept well, with happiness, whatever it brings you. It will not be wrong even if it is bad for you. Good or bad is indifferent as it is part of the divine becoming. (from a work entitled "we and the stoics today" by Dimitris Liarmakopoulos, member of the Epicurean Garden in Thessaloniki)

My conclusion : Stoics are the suckers of any ideological/political/religious system, they spend their life within their famous "sympathy" for the whole that includes also the strangers. They spend their life for the pleasures of their leaders, and in the end, as great suckers are doing, they do not have anything to get in return. Yes, epicureans are proclaiming the friendship but the epicurean friendship starts and ends in the common benefit that is measured/checked through hedonic calculation.

And stoics that are totally disapproving of their own pleasure as an issue of nongreat importance they end their life dying totally unsatisfied. They ate the nothing, they go to the nothing and their stomach remains, till the end, hungry due to their chase of abstract ideas.

Thank you very much, oh great suckers, you feed any ideological (political and religious) system. You feed with yourselves, with your natural human desires, with your fleshes and bodies any system that is like a mincer. The blindness of duty, apathy, fate and the goal of virtue preserved any emperor and any empire. And now preserves globalism, humanism, totalitarianism etc etc. 😊

Cassius:

Elli's post reminds me of this slide from the recent Catherine Wilson lecture, in which Plutarch recorded the Epicureans as describing the Stoic point of view being "the result of another and greater bad thing, savagery, or an unadulterated lust for fame, and madness."

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Elli Pensa:

Mr. Don Robertson asked somewhere Q3: Would an Epicurean consider it more desirable to live in a world populated entirely by other people who pursue their own pleasure at all costs, as the supreme good in life...etc etc.

First, their teachers Socrates through Plato attacked the pleasure as to be something that is infinite i.e. that has no limits. And now they attack to the pleasure as it is something that someone pursues at all costs.

SOCRATES: Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?

PHILEBUS: They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.

Plato above plays his devious tricks, because he wants the infinite, the absolute and the perfect. For this, when he wrote this work, he was a dotard and antierotic man. 😄

Epicurus: wrong answer Philebus ! 😏

Doctrine 3. The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body nor of mind, nor of both at once.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 31, 2019 at 3:56 PM

Quote

Donald Robertson:

That's normally a sticking point for many people, throughout history, who have found it counter-intuitive to say they would desire pleasure even at the expense of wisdom, self-awareness, or knowledge, etc. It leads to well-known dilemmas such as whether you would choose to be totally deceived/deluded about the most important things in life as long as that experience felt more pleasurable than knowing the truth.

The proper response to this comment imho is that pleasure is an inseparable part of the Canon and as such is **natural wisdom**. The "well known dilemmas" treat pleasure as separate from the Canon and therefore show a fundamental ignorance, willful or otherwise, of EP. An Epicurean does not "desire pleasure even at the expense of wisdom, self-awareness, or knowledge". An Epicurean employs pleasure (which is biological wisdom, self-awareness and knowledge), along with pain and a side order of reason, to determine the most important things in life.

There are stages in life, such as infancy and senility, when the important things in life are reduced to the pleasures of a full belly and a dry diaper. But that's a different discussion.

I think that, stated in this way, this is actually a useful starting point for discussion with Stoics and their ilk.

Post by "Cassius" of October 31, 2019 at 4:56 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

a fundamental ignorance, willful or otherwise, of EP

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

useful starting point for discussion with Stoics and their ilk

Both those thoughts go together I think. I completely agree with your post, Godfrey, but at the level we are talking about most of the people involved (at least the leaders like Robertson) IMHO have to fall under the "willful" category. This whole issue is not rocket science - it should not be hard for them to name the authority to which they are appealing if they are rejecting "feeling" as that authority. And I guess in fact they don't find it hard, they just dress up "their opinion" (which is their authority) in all sorts of high-sounding appeals to "worthiness" or "nobility" or "virtue" or whatever, all of which has absolutely no provable foundation other than their own insistence that everyone should share their opinion of it.

It's really maddening.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 22, 2020 at 8:41 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1248-exchange-with-a-stoic-donald-robertson-on-engagement-and-pleasure-vs-virtue/>

Wow - there are such fantastic replies to Donald Robertson here. I wish I could have done half so well. Bravo!

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2020 at 8:49 PM

Yes there was some good teamwork there. That was back when we had Elli actively with us. Hopefully she will be back with us soon - she is a dynamo, and of course you know Elayne is too. Elli was reluctant to be on podcasts because of course her first language is Greek, but she's an incredible resource and a "hoot" to deal with 😊