

Is Self Preservation a Virtue?

Post by "Garden Dweller" of November 7, 2019 at 8:10 AM

Life allows us to enjoy pleasure. Is self preservation of one's own life a virtue in Epicurean philosophy?

By self preservation, one might include avoiding high risk activities, seeking preventative healthcare, practicing good diet and exercise, and learning ways to extend one's health and lifespan ?

Post by "Cassius" of November 7, 2019 at 8:27 AM

Very good conversation starter. You've given a good "definition" of self preservation, but we probably need to specifically state what we mean by "a virtue" or "a virtue in Epicurean philosophy" too. Because we have the overarching principle that pleasure is the guide to everything, so nothing can be virtuous if it does not promote pleasure (which I think we can consider to include within "promoting pleasure" the subset of activities included in "avoiding pain").

So keeping in mind that the goal is always pleasure, we can't say that self-preservation is ALWAYS what the Epicurean will pursue (which is probably a way to consider a "virtue"?) because we know that Epicurus said that on occasion one will die for a friend, and there is the reference in Torquatus that we will sometime choose to leave the theatre when the play ceases to please us.

But there are the references that say "life is desirable" (Menoecus) and also the statement that the man is of little account who has many reasons to end his life (I always forget the cite for that. Anyone?) And there is the PD to the effect that preservation of one's safety from others is a natural good.

So in GENERAL self-preservation would be the chosen course, but just like everything else other than "pleasure" itself, there are definitely going to be exceptions.

How's that for a start?

Post by “Godfrey” of November 7, 2019 at 11:59 AM

Quote

By self preservation, one might include avoiding high risk activities, seeking preventative healthcare, practicing good diet and exercise, and learning ways to extend one's health and lifespan ?

Self preservation taken to its extreme might look something like Oblomovitis! On a more sensible level it would lead to "freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance". Also, there is the consideration of intensity of pleasure v the length of pleasure: a longer life isn't necessarily better than a shorter but more pleasurable life.

To me, there's a point where pursuing good health, fitness, and keeping up with the latest health info goes from good sense to obsession, and I confess I tend to cross that line all too frequently. EP keeps reminding me to focus on enjoyment, while being aware of the hedonic calculus. My interpretation of the hedonic calculus contains a factor of self preservation, but mainly because the nature of the calculus is maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

So I would say self preservation isn't an Epicurean virtue, but it is quite sensible. And what it entails is entirely subjective.

Post by “Cassius” of November 7, 2019 at 1:01 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So I would say self preservation isn't an Epicurean virtue,

Stated that way, Godfrey, what *would* you say is "an Epicurean virtue"?

Post by “Godfrey” of November 7, 2019 at 2:14 PM

That's an excellent and incisive question Cassius.

Following my current thinking to its conclusion, the only virtue I would recognize is prudence. DeWitt lists several virtues in EAHP. The dictionary definition of virtue is "high moral standard". The definition of morality is principles of right and wrong and/or good and bad behavior. As I understand it, in a universe of atoms and void there is no objective morality. Prudence then becomes the mother of all morality as it is necessary for making good choices.

Getting from the mother to a list of children involves, it seems, subjecting various potential candidates to the Canon as well as to hedonic calculus. In order for something to pass the hedonic calculus as being worthy of being labeled a virtue, it would need to have a pleasurable result in all cases. Self preservation didn't survive this process, in my mind.

As for labeling other things as virtues, I haven't yet gone through this process as I'm just figuring it out. Which is a reason why Garden Dweller's initial question is an excellent question!



Post by "Cassius" of November 7, 2019 at 2:22 PM

Ah Godfrey that reminds me that we miss you (and others) who have not been able to attend the Skype Book Reviews.

This past week [JAWS](#) raised the excellent point that DeWitt's list seems to be more of his personal list of how to fit Epicurean positions into a "virtue framework," rather than there really being a list of "Epicurean virtues" documentable in the texts.

Did they in fact have a list of "virtues" different from the standard list? Did they consider it useful to have their own list of characteristics that constituted a "special" list that they considered "virtues."

I am not sure that they did, but maybe / probably they just used the existing terminology, like they used the existing term for "gods."

So this is an area that DeWitt is helpful but we probably need to be careful to interpret HIM sympathetically, just like he interprets Epicurus favorably.

We have in Torquatus a list where he goes through the standard virtues, so we definitely have that as a point of reference, but whether he too was considering them as especially Epicurean, or just referring to the non-Epicurean list, is probably the same question as before.

So I am not sure if "Epicurean virtue" really conveys something that is a one-to-one equivalent with the term "virtue" as it is normally used. I wonder if "Epicurean virtue" means much more than "any tool which is practically successful in the attainment of pleasure." (And I continue

here to not attach "and avoidance of pain" because are they not the same thing when looked at through Epicurean glasses?)

Post by “Garden Dweller” of November 7, 2019 at 3:37 PM

Let me state a hypothetical position without using the word virtue:

In one's rational behavior decisionmaking (hedonic calculus), one should always consider the risk of death or injury associated with the behavior, and the impact of the behavior on one's health and longevity. This self-preservation assessment is equally important or superior to the question of whether the behavior will result in pleasure.

Justification: Life is what allows us to enjoy pleasure, so preservation and extension of one's life is the prime directive to maximize one's ability to experience pleasure.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 7, 2019 at 4:31 PM

Cassius I was wondering the same thing about DeWitt's list; it seems like deriving "virtues" from the texts would involve interpretation of some sort. (Re the Skype calls, I keep hoping to make it, but an ongoing project is dragging on and Sunday mornings are my only time to catch up on sleep here on the west coast 😓 Hopefully I'll make it this week! 😊)

Garden Dweller, life is the greatest good. That might be the closest thing to an absolute for any living thing and definitely enters into any decision. But two examples which I think illustrate the subjectivity of how to preserve life are:

- skydiving or other thrill seeking would be considered by some to be foolishly dangerous, by others to be as important as living
- for some people, living with a serious and extremely painful illness can be looked upon as another adventure or challenge and something to be endured, for others it's a reason to end life

Therefore it could be said that even the decision to live or die can be subordinate to the individual's weighing of pleasure and pain, moderated by a very large portion of prudence.

Post by “Cassius” of November 7, 2019 at 5:27 PM

[Quote from Garden Dweller](#)

This self-preservation assessment is equally important or superior to the question of whether the behavior will result in pleasure.

I wonder if this is sufficiently generalized to reflect that sometimes we will choose to die for a friend?

Post by “Elayne” of November 8, 2019 at 1:10 PM

I would not say self preservation is superior at all. Pleasure is a term that includes life already-- a dead thing can't have pleasure. So to maximize pleasure already means to maximize pleasurable aliveness. Life without pleasure or hope of future pleasure has no good in it-- it can't stand alone as a valuable thing.

I think the thing that confuses people is that life can be present without pleasure -- separable-- but pleasure is literally a meaningless word without life-- inseparable. To try and separate things out by putting life first gets you into the weeds. If you put pleasure first, no more weeds.

Post by “Elayne” of November 8, 2019 at 1:14 PM

Even in Epicurus' example of the great pleasure one feels upon escaping a situation threatening one's life IMO includes the assumption that this life one wants is pleasurable. Otherwise we wouldn't want it. People are not relieved, for instance, if their planned medical euthanasia for fatal/intractably painful condition is postponed!

Post by “Cassius” of November 8, 2019 at 2:01 PM

Both of those last comments by Elayne are more reasons why I think it would be very productive to spend more time on unpacking exactly what is meant by the term "pleasure." Just like "happiness" we throw the word around as if it is obvious but it has many subtleties that need to be explicitly understood.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 8, 2019 at 3:10 PM

Concerning "thrillseeking", I just came across this quote from Jill Heinerth, a cave diver: "I'm actually risk averse... I think that it's important to be scared". This just illustrates to me an understanding of risk and a commitment to do the work necessary to minimize potential pain (or death) in order to achieve a potential pleasure.

The movie Free Solo 👍👍 is an illustration of this idea. It follows a world class rock climber as he prepares for and executes a climb of El Capitan without safety equipment. Watching the movie was enough of a "thrill" for me! But it effectively illustrates the subjectivity that goes into the hedonic calculus.

Post by “Garden Dweller” of November 8, 2019 at 6:37 PM

Our written language is somewhat limited in the meanings it can convey through a single word. The words "pain" and "pleasure" are not adequate to describe the positive and negative sensations which we receive from our environment. Some synonyms for pain that one may sense include distress, dismay, discomfort, worry, anxiety, disturbance, fear, bother, discontent, displeasure, stress, distastefulness and unpleasantness. Synonyms for pleasure that one may sense include joy, peace, relief, comfort, contentment, enjoyment and satisfaction.

Post by “Cassius” of November 8, 2019 at 7:11 PM

Garden Dweller that opens up an interesting discussion from a lot of directions but you do seem to be able to fit each of those more details word descriptions into one or the other category (pain or pleasure).

That's why I think that the real issue is not that there should be a more precise definition of pleasure and pain, but that in the end we are really talking about "feeling" in the sense of "feeling" vs divine revelation or ideal forms or abstract logic. Feelings are essentially "sensations" that we don't need words to describe, and it's only when we have to start communicating with others and putting things into more complicated constructions that the issues begin.

But in the end, despite whatever difficulties there may be in talking about feelings, we have a firm point of reference because we FEEL them rather than having to have them explained to us by someone or something outside ourselves.

Post by "Garden Dweller" of November 8, 2019 at 7:13 PM

The feeling is more real (or true) than the abstraction of language that we use to describe it.