

# **Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy - 1 - Do Not People Agree That Virtue More Admirable Than Pleasure?**

**Post by "Cassius" of March 11, 2017 at 3:57 PM**

[Cassius Amicus](#)

[March 7 at 7:02pm](#)

**\*\*Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy\*\*** (1): Suppose some person attains a perfect state of pleasure. (I'll leave it for others to define, as it seems to me there's some disagreement among modern Epicureans about exactly how this should be defined, but that probably doesn't matter.) Compare that to another person who exhibits exceptional moral wisdom and courage. Let's suppose that (likely or not) they appear quite different in other regards: so the pleasure exemplar isn't known for virtue and the virtue exemplar isn't known for "pleasure". Does history not show that the majority of people tend to find the second type of person more admirable and praiseworthy? Is it not the case that those qualities better meet our preconception of what's supremely good in life? (Some people will undoubtedly disagree but I think most would agree with the above.)

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that an Epicurean said that on reflection, he probably did find wisdom and courage, in themselves, more admirable than pleasure/contentment, or whatever. If his doctrine is that pleasure is the supreme good, that would appear to highlight a contradiction between his implicit moral values and his professed philosophy. That's the type of reductio argument, I would expect a Stoic to use with an individual Epicurean. (Again, there will be some individuals who simply reject the premises, but that's okay.) Someone else might admit they admire wisdom and courage (virtue) more than "pleasure" in other people, on reflection, but deny that's a problematic sort of contradiction. They might say they're happy admiring qualities in other people more than they desire them for themselves. The Stoics, though, would challenge that as hypocrisy and argue that we all should (and at some level do) desire to be consistent in our thinking, especially about such important matters as our moral values.

I think they'd want to argue that there is a problem if we try to separate what we value most about the character of other people from what we value most for ourselves. They see that sort of conflict in our values as a sort of alienation from the rest of mankind. If what I actually admire most about other people is their wisdom and moral integrity then that sort of thing should be my priority for myself as well. On the other hand, if what I admire most about them is how pleasantly contented their life is, then that should probably be my own number one goal in life too. There aren't very many figures in history whom people admire for being like Epicurus in that respect, though. There are obviously many more examples of historical figures who are

admired for what we call virtue, or strength of character. Now that's not intended as a proof, merely an illustration. The individual would need to reflect on their own moral preconceptions and determine whether they're being applied consistently or not, maybe by looking at the range of figures they most admire in life themselves (not merely the ones the rest of society admires).



**[nathan harry bartman](#) I think there is an error in supposing that 'a perfectly happy Epicurean' and 'a perfectly wise Stoic' should necessarily appear quite different. To me, regardless of the meta-discourse each uses to express their philosophy, the two, if they are as 'undisturbed' as each truly claims to be, should nonetheless bare similarly desirable fruits: patience, reflection, consistency, analysis, equanimity, composure.**

**If I were to play devil's advocate, and attempt to persuade a 'real' Stoic and a 'real' Epicurean that it is a positive thing to intravenously take heroin, I would expect both philosophers to reject my premise. They both would likely point out drug withdrawal, and symptoms of substance abuse, and argue that habituated heroin use is a negative. Regardless of our identifying it as being 'un-virtuous' or 'un-pleasurable,' the end result is the same: avoid heroin.**

**The contrast between these two philosophies is important, but I see danger in the mere intellectual act of comparison. It can lead to an over-emphasis on the differences, which may marginalize the underlying similarities that contribute to hyperbole. Within this context, I think that 'the Epicurean' has been unfairly portrayed as a selfish party monster in constant danger of becoming a conflict-avoidant agoraphobe. Likewise, the 'Stoic' sounds more and more like a sexless monk suffering from a dissociative personality disorder. Neither of these caricatures are human.**

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/141-stoic-challenges-to-epicurean-philosophy-1-do-not-people-agree-that-virtue-more/>

[Michael Carteron](#) or type unknown

**[Michael Carteron](#)** I don't think Epicureans believe these things can be separated to begin with. The average person is likely to find a cheerless though brave person, who is unhappy yet virtuous, also lacking.

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[Jimmy Daltrey](#) or type unknown

**[Jimmy Daltrey](#)** I get the impression that the ancients threw rocks at each other over different arguments: the Stoics that pleasure is base and animalistic, the Epicureans that a belief in providence is superstition.

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[Jason Baker](#) or type unknown

**[Jason Baker](#)** Absolutely. The arguments against Epicurean philosophy that I read really seem like naive nonsense that a week hitting the books would cure. Given some of the responses we see here, it seems that our criticisms of Stoicism don't hit the mark because no one who comes here is a Real Stoic™ that believes in providence anymore.  [1f603.png](#) or type unknown

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[Jimmy Daltrey](#) or type unknown

**[Jimmy Daltrey](#)** Seneca actually quotes Epicurus to justify this "What is good is easy to get", that humans and the Cosmos are adapted to one another. The Stoics are certainly creationists, although their God is immanent, present in matter, not transcendent like the Pl...[See More](#)

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[Jason Baker](#)

**[Jason Baker](#)** I really don't think it can be stated enough, that without belief in Providence, Stoic ethics have no foundation. There is no rational basis for choosing one virtue over another without it, unless pleasure enters the equation.

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[Jimmy Daltrey](#)

**Jimmy Daltrey** The Stoic would argue from nature, that animals are motivated by pleasure, however humans have intellect also, so our natures are different. Humans are moved by understanding, by reason (as well as pleasure). Virtue is no more than applied wisdom.

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Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** Of course that begs the question on what basis is wisdom founded.

  type unknown

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** Same basis as the Epicureans, observation from nature. Compare a prudent man to a foolish man. The Epicurean calculus requires prudence, the foolish fall into drunkenness and obesity.

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Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** Certainly but the Epicurean calculus can be tested immediately. The feeling of pleasure and pain is imminent and irrational, needing nothing more than to be noted. Post hoc rationalization is the only way for a Stoic to judge an action as virtuous. What standard does he have but vagaries that are subject to time and place?

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Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** Specifically Donald mentioned repeatedly the need to compare and admire other virtuous men. This seems quite unorthodox, a direct borrowing from Aristotle. It's a direct appeal to culture, which we know can have a corrupting influence and prevent men from becoming wise.

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** The virtue of an action is determined by its intent and its intent is determined by the character/wisdom of the individual. Both Stoics and Epicurean can be mistaken in their assessment of a situation. The Stoic leans hard on cold assessment, accurate ...[See More](#)

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** Hercules is admired as a role model.

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Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** I don't see religion and emotions having much to do with one another directly.

**The road to hel is paved with good intentions.**  

**Like** · **Reply** · **1** · **March 8 at 2:31pm**

Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** Apologies for my brevity, I'm dealing with other issues right now.

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** That's a fair criticism, however it depends on the nature of your intentions as to how far out of whack your plans can go. The more prudent you are the less you run a risk of it all going pear shaped.

**Like** · **Reply** · **1** · **March 8 at 2:35pm**

Jason Baker

**Jason Baker** I think that's too close to Donald's criticism of Epicureans wanting to control their experience to not be tarred with the same brush.

**Like** · **Reply** · **March 8 at 2:39pm**

Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** I don't follow. Can you elaborate?


**Like** · **Reply** · **March 8 at 2:45pm**

Michael Carteron 

**Michael Carteron** The world does suck in lots of ways (just not all). So where does that leave us with Providence?

**Like** · **Reply** · **March 8 at 8:44pm**

Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** That it doesn't suck completely, and if it were different in any significant way, we wouldn't be here. As an atheist I like to think that the Anthropic principle covers Providence. Imagine living on Venus or Mars...you couldn't, we get to live here which is cool  ?

**Like** · **Reply** · **March 9 at 10:27am**

Michael Carteron

**Michael Carteron** Providence is defined as "divine guidance and care" so I think I'd call it "good fortune" myself, though yes, it appears the Anthropic Principle covers it. The ancient Stoics would disagree however, as do many now.

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Cassius Amicus type unknown

Write a reply...

Cassius Amicus

**Cassius Amicus** (1) in a world dominated by Christianity and Islam, I most emphatically reject the "opinion of the majority" as determining what is admirable and praiseworthy. Quite possibly I would feel differently about the majority if I were living in 70 BC Rome and Italy had been swept by an Epicurean wave, as Cicero complains. So I consider the "opinion of the majority" to be of little to no help in these ethical issues. [ "Does history not show that the majority of people tend to find the second type of person more admirable and praiseworthy?"] VS 29 "In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and like an oracle to give answers serviceable to all mankind, even though no one should understand me, rather than to conform to popular opinions and so win the praise freely scattered by the mob." VS45 "The study of nature does not make men productive of boasting or bragging nor apt to display that culture which is the object of rivalry with the many, but high-spirited and self-sufficient, taking pride in the good things of their own minds and not of their circumstances."

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Elli Pensa

**Elli Pensa**

**Like** · **Reply** · **March 8 at 2:40pm**

Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

Michael Carteron

**Michael Carteron** The appeal to majority is simply a fallacy, of no merit.

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** What he is trying to get at is the question: is someone who runs into a burning building to save a child a "better" person than say, a monk, who spends his life in serene and tranquil meditation? Most people would say the former (I think), where that observation takes us would be the next step in the debate.

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Michael Carteron

**Michael Carteron** Well it wasn't clear from his post. So, better how?

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** That is the question. What do we value? How do we arrive at our values? How do we justify our values? It all gets very Socratic.

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Michael Carteron

**Michael Carteron** Yes, it is difficult.

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Cassius Amicus

*Write a reply...*

Cassius Amicus

**Cassius Amicus** (2) The word "admire" as used as the basis of this question is also curious ("On the other hand, if what I admire most about them..."). I see two main definitions of admire (1 "regard (an object, quality, or person) with respect or warm approval".) or 2 "look at with pleasure." Definition 2 poses no problems and unwinds the issue - if I regard something as pleasurable and find that desirable, then I have properly identified the issue. Definition 1 however implies the road to the false problem - it implies that I have "reasoned" myself to the conclusion that there is

something about the thing more important than that it is pleasurable. One can imagine all sorts of things, and have all sorts of fantasies, but in the end matters of opinion have nothing to rest on but .... opinion. Pleasure, however, is a faculty that is easily understood by all men, and needs no explanation or justification. "Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow is white, honey is sweet. None of these things need be proved by elaborate argument -- it is enough merely to draw attention to them. For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder. The former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident." (Torquatus/Cicero/On Ends)

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[Jason Baker](#) or type unknown

[Jason Baker](#) Let's turn the main argument around, just to get a feel for how useful it is for illuminating things.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that a Stoic said that on reflection he probably did find pleasure, in itself, more preferable than courage, tranq...[See More](#)

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[Elli Pensa](#) [Jason Baker](#)

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[Cassius Amicus](#)

*Write a reply...*

[Hiram Crespo](#) or type unknown

[Hiram Crespo](#) VS 29 is critical of the the morality of the mobs. I am sure that many people admire the so-called "virtuous" over the people who lead lives of pleasure, but this says nothing about how we can be happy. It also is the kind of question asked by someone who has absolutely no interest in being authentic or genuine or natural, who will subject himself to the whims and the values and ideals invented in the heads of others.

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** I don't think donning the air of virtue in exchange for acclaim is approved of. Hypocrisy is not a virtue.

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 **Cassius Amicus** type unknown

**Cassius Amicus** Unfortunately I am afraid that the crowd often approves exactly that, even if the hypocrisy is transparent.

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Jimmy Daltrey

**Jimmy Daltrey** True. Who is it that said you can't reason with a crowd?

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 **Hiram Crespo** or type unknown

**Hiram Crespo** . or that appeasing the crowd is a path to pleasant existence. It is the path of politicians and lawyers maybe.

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