

Epicurean Attitudes Toward Emotion

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 7:28 AM

I don't know how many times we are asked something about "Epicurean techniques" for achieving happiness. Many of these questions come from people who have recently been toying with Stoicism, and I think in a significant number of cases they are really asking:

"How do I manage my emotions to keep them from getting the best of me?"

That's a large part of the reason that as soon as they find out that Stoicism is all about the "suppression" of emotion, and the treating of emotion as an enemy of the best life, that many people are quickly out the door of the Porch.

Probably the first part of the education process is to show these people that Epicurus held feeling - the feeling of pleasure, which includes pleasurable emotions - as the goal of life, and that emotion is not the enemy. As Diogenes Laertius recorded about the Epicurean, in contrast to the non-Epicurean:

He [the Epicurean wise man] will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom.

But after that, can we assemble some thoughts from other aspects of Epicurean philosophy that will help in describing the Epicurean attitude toward emotions? I hesitate to use the term "management" of emotion, but maybe that is not far from accurate. Ultimately, this issue is probably a subset of the analysis voiced by Torquatus in On Ends, when he laid out the basic theory to Cicero.

Can we substitute "pleasurable emotion" for "pleasure" in this text?

Quote

No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided.

But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

It might be a start to say that "pleasurable emotion" is the goal, and the guide, while "pursuing pleasure rationally" with maximized pleasure remaining always the goal, is the technique.

But there's a lot more that can be said, and I'm starting this thread to see what we can develop.

Post by "Don" of March 10, 2020 at 10:38 AM

I just came across this article online and wanted to get it linked before I lost it:

[Julie Annas. *Epicurean Emotions*. University of Arizona, 1989.](#)

I have not had a chance to read it yet except for the first paragraph or so.

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 11:00 AM

Directly on Point! Thank you!

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 11:21 AM

I will be very interested in comments from other readers on this essay. There are several aspects of this article that reinforce my view that people should be cautious in trying to read too much into fragments from Philodemus or anyone else. It seems highly unlikely to me that Epicurus thought it wise to hyper-analyze any emotion any more than he would obsess on any one pleasure, because the issue is so contextual. In fact the very attempt to derive strict rules on anger or any other emotion, just like with any pleasure, would violate the core premises of the philosophy. There are several references in this article that make clear that the later followers of Epicurus were disputing among themselves about this, and we ought to first ask if they were on the wrong track by even following this path at all, rather than presume that they were in some desirable manner expanding or extending or improving on what Epicurus had taught.

Yes we need to think about these issues and that's the purpose of this thread, but attempting to come up with bright line rules for anger or any other emotion is probably exactly the wrong direction to take, because it is in the nature of the philosophy that such bright line rules do not exist in nature, but can only be generalized arising from the context of the totality of the individual's circumstances.

Ultimately, given how little Julia Annas seems to really derive out of the exercise, that may be one of the main take-aways from her work here.

Epicurean Emotions

Julia Annas

IN CONTRAST to the Stoic theory of the emotions, Epicurean theory on this topic has been somewhat neglected. This is partly because there does not seem to be much theory in our sources; and I shall admit at the start that the theory I find is inferred rather than read off from our sources—a frequent situation in Epicurean studies. Partly also it may be because one of our best sources is Philodemus' *On Anger*, a work that, like all Philodemus, is frequently scholastic, baffling, and difficult even to construe.¹ This fascinating treatise is nevertheless useful in many ways, for it shows us Philodemus adjusting Epicureanism to a changing philosophical climate; and his main line of analysis of the emotions is, I shall argue, an adaptation of one of Epicurus' ideas developed in a different context.

But two points are relevant here. One is that at this stage in his essay Philodemus is engaging in controversy with other Epicureans, who had differing views about the way anger enters into the life of the ideal wise person; sketching the ideal life is always difficult, and Philodemus' idea on the subject is not the only one, even for Epicureans. Given that all parties refer to the words of the Master, we may infer that Epicurus' own work left this point in dispute, and that different followers took up different aspects of the system to deal with it. Possibly Philodemus was impressed by Epicurus' statement that natural desires are easy to fulfill; this would suggest that natural anger, based on natural desires, is not a different kind of anger but just a more *limited* version of ordinary anger, easily satisfied.

The other point is that our ideas on this subject are not likely to be unprejudiced, either. They are likely to be influenced by hangovers from Christian tradition, in which the meek are blessed and one should turn the other cheek rather than retaliate. Even if we reject this, we have no very clear idea of what to put in its place. While Philodemus' more detailed positive account will scarcely do, Epicurean ideas on this particular emotion still retain interest for us, and we can only regret that we lack similarly rich Epicurean sources for other emotions.²

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 11:30 AM

¹⁶ I should admit at once that this suggestion runs counter to the only ancient source that interprets the classification of desires in terms of degrees of specificity, the scholion to Arist. *Eth.Nic.* 1118b8, quoted in Usener 456. The scholiast gives as examples of a necessary desire, the desires for food and for clothing; as an example of a natural and not necessary desire, the desire for sex; and as an example of desires that are neither, "the desire for such-and-such (τοιῶνδε) food or such-and-such (τοιᾶσδε) clothing or such-and-such (τοιῶνδε) sex." We have, however, no reason to give this scholion authority; and this explanation quite fails to accommodate KD 30, with its clear implication that a desire can be either natural and not necessary, or empty (on the scholiast's view it would be both generic and specific). The scholion also makes the necessary/not necessary distinction artificial; we have as plausible a need for sex as for clothing. One can defend the view that all natural desires are unspecific (as Martha Nussbaum does), on the grounds that empty beliefs come in only when the agent wants one thing or kind of thing rather than

I find all efforts to come up with discrete lists of "natural" and "necessary" to be artificial and unlikely to be something that Epicurus himself encouraged. That observation is behind my resistance to thinking that there is any kind of discrete / absolute / bright line "Epicurean measure of wealth" or Epicurean measure of anything else, other than in the most generic form of saying that it is the most pleasure and the least pain, but even that is clearly totally contextual to the individual involved.

So I think Julia Annas is right here that there is **no reason to give this scholion authority**, and every reason to question his judgment in adding this to the text.

Edit: I think where Epicurus was going with this is stated by Torquatus: the principle of the classification is that some pleasures are easier to get and some require more effort. That's the kind of thing you need to think about when you evaluate which path to choose in any course of conduct. He's giving practical advice on things to consider, not drawing bright lines.

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 11:40 AM

Ok last of my related by somewhat random thoughts: I find discussion of "empty" to be fruitless without a LOT more explanation than is generally given to this issue. No doubt Epicurus had something in mind, but throwing around the word "empty" in our discussions means little, in my view, and appears to be superficial and unhelpful. Pleasure is pleasure, and pain is pain, and an experience of pleasure or pain is in itself never "empty." If what is being meant is that the pain outweighs the pleasure in the end, then that needs to be stated clearly, which "empty" does not convey. But I am not even sure that that is what is meant, as it appears more likely that Epicurus intended it as a synonym for "unnatural," which would require a lot more discussion as to what is meant.

Therefore so as far as i am concerned any modern reference to "empty desire" is more confusing than it is helpful (again, unless much deep explanation is provided). Otherwise, the result is some kind of Platonic idealism of a particular type of desire or action.

I just don't think the modern writers (and possibly Philodemus, depending on what he actually wrote, which is almost impossible to say) are going in the same direction as Epicurus intended. Since we aren't sure what Philodemus or these other writers were arguing about, I would not presume that any of them were wrong; I would say this is an example where we should "wait" to form a judgment about them unless and until we get more texts.

Edit: Referencing the quote below, I would say not only is there no "simple" answer, there is no "complex" answer either, if what is meant by "answer" is a bright line. My reading of the Epicurean viewpoint is that there ARE no bright lines (simple or complex) that apply across groups of people, only individuals in context.

There is no simple answer, according to Philodemus (XXXVII), to the question whether anger is a bad thing or a good. This is because “anger” is used in two ways; in order to avoid fallacy, one must distinguish between “natural anger” (φυσικὴ ὀργή) and “empty anger” (κενὴ ὀργή).⁶ Philodemus does not explain the distinction, though he probably did so in a part of the essay now missing.

The term κενός, literally “empty,” can also mean “futile, pointless” (LSJ *s.v.* I.2); thus the expression “empty anger” for a defective kind of anger is not as striking in Greek as it is in English.⁷ However, contrasting what is empty with what is *natural* is striking, and is bound to remind us, especially in an Epicurean author, of Epicurus’ distinction between natural and empty *desires*:

ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί, καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον· τῶν δὲ ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀσχησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

We should reflect that of desires some are natural, some empty. Of the natural, some are only natural and some are necessary. Of the necessary, some are necessary for happiness, some for comfort of the body, and some for life itself (*Ep. ad Men.* 127).

Post by “Elli” of March 10, 2020 at 12:53 PM

The greek word “κενός” goes hand in hand with the word “μάταιος” and both have the same meaning. In english is the word “vain”. An example, where Epicurus used these words, it is in one of his letter to Anaxarchos (see photo) :

“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”



And that means it is better to have something that is certain that take a risk to get more, where you might lose everything.

απ. 116 ἐν τῇ πρὸς Ἀνάξαρχον ἐπιστολῇ ταυτὶ γέγραφεν (Ἐπίκουρος): ἐγὼ δ' ἐφ' ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς παρακαλῶ καὶ οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρετάς, κενὰς καὶ ματαίας καὶ ταραχώδεις ἐχούσας τῶν καρπῶν τὰς ἐλπίδας.

Και πρὸς τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τοῦ πρὸς Ἀνάξαρχο αὐτὰ εἶχε γράψει (ὁ Ἐπίκουρος): ἐγὼ σε προσκαλῶ σὺς συνεχεῖς ἡδονές καὶ ὄχι σὺς κενές, μάταιες καὶ ταραχώδεις ἀρετές που ἔχουν τοὺς καρπούς τῆς ἐλπίδας.

fg 116 And to his letter to Anaxarchos (Epicurus) has written these: I summon you to the constant pleasures and not to the empty, trifling and agitated virtues that have the fruits of hope.

The hope for empty, trifling and agitated things and issues reminds me a greek idiom: “κάλλιο πέντε καὶ στὸ χέρι παρά δέκα καὶ καρτέρι”. In english there is a similar idiom: "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush".

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2020 at 1:10 PM

Now "empty" when applied to VIRTUE does make sense, because virtue is not its own reward; virtue must be performed for some other purpose, so "empty" makes good sense there.

As to "vain" that presumably is a synonym for "fruitlessly" rather than a reference to "vanity" (?)

Post by “Elli” of March 10, 2020 at 1:24 PM

Another example is here : «**Κενός** εκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὕφ’ οὗ μηδέν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται· ὥσπερ γάρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδεν ὄφελος μή τάς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως οὐδέ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μή τό τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος».

"A philosopher's words are empty (or vain) if they do not heal the suffering of man. For just as medicine is useless if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy is useless if it does not remove suffering from the soul".

As for the desires Epicurus to be called as empty or vain...Imo Epicurus does not judge the desires for themselves, he does not say anywhere to eliminate our desires for reaching any Nirvana. No, he just judges/measures the consequences of some of the desires. The vain/empty desires usually lead to nothing!

Example : We could say as empty or vain desires those that are based on idealism. e.g. we will save all the world, all we can get along, virtue for the sake of virtue, the greatest good for the greatest number, the absolute justice that exists in the world of ideas, the ideologies/obsessions of all -isms etc etc.

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2020 at 1:32 PM

So a desire is probably never "vain" or "empty" in itself (i.e., there is no idealist classification of desires, even something like "fame," that is ALWAYS empty in itself, but if we want to generalize, which we have to in order to actually live our lives, we look at the context and circumstances and past experience and make our best estimate, using reason, of what is likely to occur if we choose to pursue a particular desire at a particular time in place. Would that be a reasonable way of expressing the point?

Post by “Elli” of March 10, 2020 at 2:18 PM

I would better say using "prudence" that is higher than philosophy. Prudence can be connected with our desires along with their consequences i.e. our experiences that have been measured/checked among pleasure and pain, and they have been led, still are leading and will lead to pleasure. Since **pleasure is the goal**.

And suddenly a loud voice came to disturb the peace of the universe ...

...PLEASURE IS THE GOAL!

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2020 at 2:24 PM

I wonder what the root derivation of prudent / prudentia / etc really is. Could well be worthwhile to start using that word and stressing how it is different from "logic" or "divine commandment" or "virtue" and things like that. Unfortunately it's main connotation today might be "prude" which is very negative, but that's no reason to fight over it if it's worth fighting over. Stripping the vocabulary of useful terms has been one of the great successes of the anti-Epicureans.

Post by “Elli” of March 10, 2020 at 2:47 PM

Prudence from Latin *prūdēns*, *prūdent*, present participle of *prōvidēre*, *to provide for*.

1. caution in practical affairs; discretion or circumspection
2. care taken in the management of one's resources
3. consideration for one's own interests
4. the condition or quality of being prudent

Example : The wise man will take care of his property, and provide for the future.

Post by “Don” of March 10, 2020 at 2:59 PM

I also found this at the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#):

prudence (n.)

mid-14c. (c. 1200 as a surname), mid-14c., "intelligence; discretion, foresight; wisdom to see what is suitable or profitable;" also one of the four cardinal virtues, "wisdom to see what is virtuous;" from Old French *prudence* (13c.) and directly from Latin *prudētia* "a foreseeing, foresight, sagacity, practical judgment," contraction of *providētia* "foresight" (see providence). Secondary sense of "wisdom" (late 14c.) is preserved in jurisprudence.

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2020 at 3:26 PM

Perhaps one of the major take-aways from the background of prudence might be that it does not appear to be linked to "logic"--- and if in fact "in a given situation at the appropriate time" is in fact a part of the meaning, then that certainly sounds situational rather than "idealistic" / "absolute"

Four **cardinal virtues** were recognized by Plato and in the Bible, classical antiquity and in traditional Christian theology:

- **Prudence** (φρόνησις, *phronēsis*; Latin: *prudentia*; also *Wisdom*, *Sophia*, *sapientia*), the ability to discern the appropriate course of action to be taken in a given situation at the appropriate time.
- **Courage** (ἀνδρεία, *andreia*; Latin: *fortitudo*); also termed fortitude, forbearance, strength, endurance, and the ability to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation
- **Temperance** (σωφροσύνη, *sōphrosynē*; Latin: *temperantia*); also known as restraint, the practice of self-control, abstinence, discretion, and moderation tempering the **appetition**. *Sōphrosynē* can also be translated as sound-mindedness.
- **Justice** (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosynē*; Latin: *iustitia*); also considered as fairness, the most extensive and most important virtue;^[1] the Greek word also having the meaning righteousness

Post by “Don” of March 11, 2020 at 12:08 AM

[Quote from Elli](#)

Another example is here : «**Κενός** εκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὕφ’ οἷ μὴδέν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται· ὥσπερ γάρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδεν ὄφελος μὴ τὰς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως οὐδέ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μὴ τό τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος».

"A philosopher's words are empty (or vain) **if they do not heal the suffering of man**. For just as medicine is useless if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy is useless if it does not remove suffering from the soul". (Emphasis added)

I think [Elli](#) and [Cassius](#) 's points here perfectly illustrate the Epicurean relative perspective. Something isn't "empty" or "vain" in an absolute sense. There are no Platonic "empty desires" for example. It is the results of something by which something is judged empty or not:

Which words of the Philosopher are empty?

Those that do not heal the suffering of man.

Thank you, [Elli](#) for spelling this out initially above!

[Elli](#) , am I correct in understanding that here:

ὥσπερ γάρ ἰατρικῆς **οὐδεν** ὄφελος μή τὰς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως **οὐδέ** φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μή τό τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος»

that **οὐδεν** means something like "nothing/no/none" so those lines could be translated something like:

"... For just as medicine **means nothing (has no benefit (ὄφελος))** if it does not remove sickness from the body, so philosophy **means nothing** if it does not remove suffering from the soul".

I'm asking because the juxtaposition of both **empty** and **nothing/no/none** seems possibly significant to me.

Post by "Godfrey" of March 11, 2020 at 7:23 PM

Returning to the initial post in this thread, I think it's instructive to compare EP to the Stoics. Stoicism involves (often miserable) mental training practices to prepare one for future adverse situations. In contrast, Epicurean practices involve training in understanding the underlying "nature of things": by having this understanding, the Epicurean removes some underlying causes of painful emotions and is therefore free to experience both painful and pleasurable emotions more fully.

To my limited understanding, fear is an underlying contributor to anger. So removing fear where appropriate is much more therapeutic than trying to decipher whether a particular form or degree of anger is "okay" or not. Removing fear goes deeper in that it works to transform a person from an "angry person" to a "not so angry person". But anger is by no means the only emotion. We would also need to deal with sadness, grief, depression, longing, envy and on and on. And what about positive emotions?

The primary fears are considered to be those of the gods and of death. Next comes a proper understanding of pleasure and pain. These are addressed in PD 1-4. We have the rather glib tetrastichos, but I'm speculating that the Epicurean theory of the emotions is based on these four doctrines and that they were further developed in writings lost to us and in life, with frank speech, in the Garden. A deep and voluminous subject on this forum is the proper understanding of pleasure which goes way beyond "pleasure is easy to obtain". I'm wondering if similar depth of study in all of PD 1-4 isn't where the Epicurean theory and therapy of the emotions lies.

Post by “Cassius” of March 11, 2020 at 7:34 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The primary fears are considered to be those of the gods and of death.

I want to comment on this because this formulation reminds me of some comments I have seen (maybe in Nussbaum) implying that death and gods were the "primary" concern of Epicurus. You're not saying this Godfrey, I know, but I have seen glib comments lots of places implying that Epicurus was primarily a therapist and he thought all he had to do was to deal with gods and death and everything would magically be OK.

I don't think that was his perspective at all. I think Epicurus highlighted those because they are of profound significance to any thinking person, no matter how healthy and normal and strong he might be otherwise. Someone can be intensely interested in those subjects without having a fearful bone in their body, and that's the way I picture Epicurus.

My point here is only that I don't think Epicurean philosophy and the PD's were organized so that they could be used like a protocol in a mental hospital -- I think they were organized in order of importance to any healthy and intelligent person.

I am sorry if my comments seem tangential but hopefully they aren't too obscure, and I don't mean to derail the point you are making, which is that we need to extend the principles and do a lot more discussion on the emotions at a very basic level.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 11, 2020 at 8:00 PM

Quote

...we need to extend the principles and do a lot more discussion on the emotions at a very basic level.

Exactly. I think that it's ultimately of limited use to try to dissect an individual emotion but is of great value to understand the factors which contribute to various emotions. For example a proper understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) has an underlying relationship to particular instances of grief, among other things. Understanding the nature of desire has an underlying relationship to envy, among other things. And so on. It seems to me that examining the nature of things as contributing factors is where the useful discussion can occur. This discussion could be carried out with regard to factors underlying particular emotions **in particular instances**,

however I've found that just increasing my understanding of nature, pleasure and desire has gone a long way toward making me a "happier" person.

Post by “Elayne” of March 14, 2020 at 12:05 AM

I had taken the word "vain" here to be the less commonly used English definition of futile. We usually say "in vain" for that, but "vain" alone can be used the same way. Vs the other meanings of worthless or prideful.

It wouldn't seem in character for Epicurus to call desire worthless or prideful, or even the object of desire-- but as Elli said, it's simply something that has no existence and thus cannot be obtained. We would desire it in vain because it doesn't exist-- say, infinite power, inexhaustible money, etc.