

Characteristics of the Wise Man, 1-9 Rough Draft of Outline

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 1:20 AM

Characteristics of an Epicurean Sage

The following is a comparison of two translations of Diogenes Laertius’s exposition of “the views of Epicurus himself and his school concerning the wise man.” There are not a lot of male pronouns in the text and many of the verbs are 3rd-person-plural (“They” do this or that...), but “the sage” or “the wise one” is the translation of ὁ σοφός, a male noun. Many of the characteristics are also aimed at men. However, gender neutral language will be used when possible in the notes, because, in light of the inclusion of women in the Garden and writing philosophical treatises, being a σοφός should (theoretically) be open to both men and women.

I undertook this to see what characteristics of someone considered a sage in Epicurean philosophy would be “outdated” and which ones could apply to our time.

The two translation under consideration are the Hicks (1925) translation as provided by Wikisource https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives_of_...osophers/Book_X and the Yonge (1895) translation available at Project Gutenberg: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/57342/57...-h.htm#Page_424 of Diogenes Laertius, Lives, Book X:117-121 with notes on the original text. For the original text, I am using the Greek version on the Perseus Digital Library: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0257>.

I have found that Yonge may have been using a different Greek text than the Hicks version on Perseus. This may account for some of the discrepancies. Also consulted was the digitized Oxford-held manuscript of DL online at <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Vi...l ms 531 fs001r> (page f171v) This is the page where section 117 begins.

I will also be referring from time to time to the 2018 translation by Pamela Mensch from OUP.

Format: Hicks translation is first, followed (indented) by Yonge. Article author’s notes come last in each bullet point.

(Working on transferring the outline format from Google Docs to forum format)

- There are three motives to injurious acts among men – hatred, envy, and contempt; and these the wise man overcomes by reason.
1. He said that injuries existed among men, either in consequence of hatred, or of envy, or of contempt, all which the wise man overcomes by reason.

1. NOTE: The three motives in the original (accusative case) are:

1. Μῖσος: hate, hatred, grudge (LSJ)
 1. Trivia: origin of the mis- in misanthrope
2. Φθόνον: ill-will or malice, esp. envy or jealousy of the good fortune of others (LSJ)
3. Καταφρόνησιν: contempt, disdain (LSJ)

Moreover, he who has once become wise never more assumes the opposite habit, not even in semblance, if he can help it.

1. Also, that a man who has once been wise can never receive the contrary disposition, nor can he of his own accord invent such a state of things as that he should be subjected to the dominion of the passions; nor can he hinder himself in his progress towards wisdom.

He will be more susceptible of emotion than other men: that will be no hindrance to his wisdom.

1. NOTE: Yonge seems to include the emotions and their non-hindrances with the above. i.e., the wise one will not let the passions hinder progress towards wisdom once they've become wise.

2. NOTE: The original text (per Perseus) is: ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν ἄπαξ γενόμενον σοφὸν μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα: πάθει μᾶλλον συσχεθήσασθαι: οὐκ ἂν ἐμποδίσει πρὸς τὴν σοφίαν. Which is composed of three clauses:

1. ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν ἄπαξ γενόμενον σοφὸν μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα:

1. Literally: Also, the once-arisen sage will no longer fall back to the opposite disposition nor be put into that mold wittingly (on purpose).

2. πάθει μᾶλλον συσχεθήσασθαι:

1. Literally: By the pathē they will exceedingly be affected...

3. οὐκ ἂν ἐμποδίσει πρὸς τὴν σοφίαν.

1. Literally: This will not be a hindrance on the path to wisdom.

3. NOTE: However, the digitized manuscript appears to have, (with punctuation as interpreted by me):

1. ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν ἄπαξ γενόμενον σοφὸν, μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν· μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα πάθει μᾶλλον συσχεθήσασθαι· οὐκ ἂν ἐμποδίσει πρὸς τὴν σοφίαν.

2. The manuscript then gives five different clauses or phrases:

3. ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν ἄπαξ γενόμενον σοφὸν,

1. Literally: Once one has become wise... (the once-arisen sage)

4. μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν·

1. Literally: ... will no longer fall back to the opposite disposition...

5. μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα πάθει μᾶλλον συσχεθήσασθαι·

1. Literally: .. nor (μηδέ) be put into (that) mold readily/wittingly by the πάθη exceedingly to be affected...

1. Συσχεθήσεσθαι: future infinitive "to be constrained, distressed, afflicted, and, generally, to be affected by anything whether in mind or body"
6. οὐκ ἂν ἐμποδίσαι πρὸς τὴν σοφίαν.
 1. Literally: .. This would not impede/hamper/fetter (their way) toward wisdom.
7. NOTE: This section appears to mean that the sage will not be exceedingly affected by the passions, emotions, etc., that they won't be overcome with emotion and this is not an impediment on the way to wisdom.
4. NOTE: I am more inclined to take Hicks's interpretation as the text being two separate ideas. This appears to flow better:
 1. The sage, once wise, won't fall back into ignorance, nor will they willingly do this on purpose.
 2. Sages are greatly affected by the pathē (i.e., more so than other people) but this doesn't hinder their progress to wisdom.
5. Trivia: ἐμποδίσαι literally means to have one's feet bound, to be put in fetters.

However, not every bodily constitution nor every nationality would permit a man to become wise.

1. That the wise man, however, cannot exist in every state of body, nor in every nation.
2. Οὐδὲ μὴν ἐκ πάσης σώματος ἕξωτος σοφὸν γενέσθαι· ἂν οὐδ' ἐν παντὶ ἔθνει.
3. NOTE: The key phrases here are:
 1. ἐκ πάσης σώματος: (neither) from every body
 1. σώματος "a body, one's life in the physical world"
 2. ἐν παντὶ ἔθνει: (nor) in every ἔθνος (tribe, nation; later referring to "barbarian" nation (non-Hellenic); class of people)
 1. Is this saying that a sage can't be found in every nation or is it saying not in certain classes? The meaning of ἔθνος is broad.
 3. ἕξωτος "of a state, habit, condition (of a body)"
4. NOTE: What does this mean? How does this connect with the evangelical nature of the philosophy? We know women were a part of the Garden and wrote treatises, so the "state of body" can't exclude women. And Epicurean communities were in "barbarian" lands. How to interpret this? Is this where DeWitt is getting that Epicurus said non-Greeks couldn't achieve wisdom? I can certainly see that if someone is incapable of studying and applying the philosophy due to mental illness, brain injury, or other condition. I can also see some "nations" not being conducive to allowing or encouraging study and application because of repression, culture, exposure to the philosophy, etc. I would be reluctant to say (for modern applications) anything akin to "women can't be sages" or "Russians can't be sages."

Even on the rack the wise man is happy.

1. That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy.

2. NOTE: It's important to remember that the original says εὐδαίμονα not "happy." There's a difference!
3. Trivia: στρεβλωθῆ literally means "stretch on the wheel or rack, to rack, torture, applied to slaves for the purpose of extracting evidence" (LSJ)

He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed.

1. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally whether they are present or absent.
2. NOTE: Is it Hicks's "he alone will feel" or Yonge's "only feel gratitude towards friends"?
3. NOTE: I find it odd that this clause is sandwiched between two mentions of torture. Is this a scribal error? Does this one about friends reference something about the sage being tortured? The Perseus original text is identical to the digitized Oxford manuscript.

When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans.

1. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture.
2. NOTE: Will the σοφός groan or not? The original text runs ὅτε μέντοι **στρεβλοῦται**, ἔνθα καὶ μύζει καὶ οἰμῶζει. There doesn't appear to be a "nor" here:
 1. ὅτε when
 2. μέντοι indeed, however, to be sure
 3. ἔνθα when
 4. μύζει I. (he) murmurs with closed lips, mutters, moans.
 5. (καὶ) οἰμῶζει
 1. (and) wails aloud, laments
3. NOTE: So, Hicks seems to have the upper hand here. This also makes sense in the light of the sage being more affected by the emotions (#3) but also remaining content under torture (#5).

As regards women, he will submit to the restrictions imposed by the law, as Diogenes says in his epitome of Epicurus' ethical doctrines.

1. Nor will he marry a wife whom the laws forbid, as Diogenes says, in his epitome of the Ethical Maxims of Epicurus.
2. Mensch's translation has: The wise man will not consort with women in any manner proscribed by law, as Diogenes says in his Epitome of Epicurus' Ethical Doctrines.
3. NOTE: Does the original text talk about marriage? Sexual relations? Consorting? γυναικί τ' οὐ μίγησθαι τὸν σοφὸν ἢ οἱ νόμοι ἀπαγορεύουσιν...
 1. Interestingly, γυναικί is the singular dative case "of, by, for (a) woman"
 2. (οὐ) μίγησθαι - one definition is "to (not) have intercourse with, to be united to, of men and women" but another if simply "to (not) mingle with."
 3. οἱ νόμοι ἀπαγορεύουσιν "the laws/customs forbid"

4. NOTE: For a modern application, consider what laws or customs dictate how men and women should behave in establishing a consensual, sexual relationship. This may be the best way to interpret this characteristic.

Nor will he punish his servants; rather he will pity them and make allowance on occasion for those who are of good character.

1. He will punish his servants, but also pity them, and show indulgence to any that are virtuous.
2. Will the σοφός punish their servants or not? The original begins with ουδέ, a mark of negation, so it appears Hicks again has the upper hand here.
3. Trivia: οἰκέτας = "household slaves". Neither translator wants to use the word "slave." Servants aren't the same as slaves.
4. NOTE: It appears the Epicurean will be benevolent to "servants" and will be sure to encourage "good" ones by rewarding them.

Only the first 9 and much revision to go. As a final product, it may end up being my own translation of the list of characteristics with something like the above as endnotes.

Feel free to take a read through and provide comments.

Post by “Joshua” of May 29, 2020 at 1:37 AM

Very promising! This has been a perennially thorny subject around here for some time, and much of it stems from most of us having so little Greek.

Post by “Martin” of May 29, 2020 at 2:45 AM

The numbering appears to be a bit odd.

Other than that, I noticed only one bug: I guess that

"..., the wise one will not let the passions hinder progress towards wisdom once they've become wise"

should be

"..., the wise one will not let the passions hinder progress towards wisdom once he has become wise".

It seems at every corner, we encounter wrong translations or significant differences between translations. Thanks for exposing some more.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 6:42 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

The numbering appears to be a bit odd.

Other than that, I noticed only one bug: I guess that

"..., the wise one will not let the passions hinder progress towards wisdom once they've become wise"

should be

"..., the wise one will not let the passions hinder progress towards wisdom once he has become wise".

It seems at every corner, we encounter wrong translations or significant differences between translations. Thanks for exposing some more.

Display More

Thank you, [Martin](#) and [Joshua](#) , for the comments.

[Martin](#) , I fully agree about the numbering system on this outline ended up odd. I'm not sure what happened in my pasting from Google. The forum didn't like it and honestly it was late when I posted so I did what I could and called it "good enough" 😊 That'll definitely be fixed in any final version.

Regarding "they", [3rd person singular "they" in that sentence](#). I was actually using the [3rd person singular "they" in that sentence](#).

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 6:57 AM

Yes great work Don! Also, would you mind editing your post by blocking it all and selecting "remove color" from the menu? Pasting it from Google brought over hard-coded dark text which is hard to see using a dark forum style. Might be good to "remove font" too so that it looks best on all forum styles. I could do it myself but once you see how that works you ll know for the future.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 7:39 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes great work Don! Also, would you mind editing your post by blocking it all and selecting "remove color" from the menu? Pasting it from Google brought over hard-coded dark text which is hard to see using a dark forum style. Might be good to "remove font" too so that it looks best on all forum styles. I could do it myself but once you see how that works you ll know for the future.

Thanks, [Cassius](#), for that hint! I do see tags for the color in the html now that you mentioned it and removed them. Nope, no need to do it yourself! This was a good learning exercise!

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 8:50 AM

Thanks and yes t hat looks much better. For the benefit of anyone else reading, it's not necessary to go into the code view if you just block select the text that is hard-coded, then select the Font Size, Font Family, or Font Color option in the editor menu. Click on that button and the last option at the bottom of each is "Remove....." and that lets you remove the hard-coding using the GUI. But either method works fine.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 9:08 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thanks and yes that looks much better. For the benefit of anyone else reading, it's not necessary to go into the code view if you just block select the text that is hard-coded, then select the Font Size, Font Family, or Font Color option in the editor menu. Click on that button and the last option at the bottom of each is "Remove....." and that lets you remove the hard-coding using the GUI. But either method works fine.

Sorry, just to let you know: I did eventually use the "Remove..." but I couldn't figure out what was wrong (since the font was already "black"... just hard-coded). When I went into the html I could see the tags and had the "eureka" moment of realizing what was going on. 😊 That GUI with the "Remove..." feature for font family, size, and color is *very* helpful! Thanks again!

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 12:30 PM

"The sage, once wise, won't fall back into ignorance, nor will they willingly do this on purpose."

Just now finding time to start detailed comment. That one has always caused me concern as being mangled, because I hear in it something that conflicts with the "free will" position. If it means that the wise man definitely won't fall back into ignorance, then it almost sounds to me like a Christian "once saved always saved" argument. If it means that the wise man probably won't fall back, then does that really mean anything other than a "truism"?

I always presume that Epicurus either is saying something important, or he is repeating for emphasis and clarity something that he already has said that is important.

So I am thinking there is more than meets the eye, or maybe I am really agreeing with what you indicate is one of the alternate translations in consolidating the passages into a point about the wise man not being generally susceptible to being overcome by emotion and pushed back into ignorance.

Is there another alternative for meaning here?

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 1:11 PM

My take is that once there sage roots out the causes of ignorance and fear and comes to realize the veracity of the "true philosophy", they can't go back to being ignorant.

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 1:12 PM

Sorry we just crossposted and I elaborated on my earlier post....

But I think your comment emphasizes my question. "Can't"? What does "can't" mean with a human nature possessing agency, and absence of fate?

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 1:26 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

NOTE: What does this mean? How does this connect with the evangelical nature of the philosophy? We know women were a part of the Garden and wrote treatises, so the "state of body" can't exclude women. And Epicurean communities were in "barbarian" lands. How to interpret this? Is this where DeWitt is getting that Epicurus said non-Greeks couldn't achieve wisdom? I can certainly see that if someone is incapable of studying and applying the philosophy due to mental illness, brain injury, or other condition. I can also see some "nations" not being conducive to allowing or encouraging study and application because of repression, culture, exposure to the philosophy, etc. I would be reluctant to say (for modern applications) anything akin to "women can't be sages" or "Russians can't be sages."

On this one, which i also agree is important, I don't think there is a conflict between (1) we are evangelical toward those who either are or could be our friends, but also (2) we acknowledge that some people just aren't and aren't going to be our friends. I agree with you that mental illness and brain injury are two categories , but there are probably lots of other circumstantial categories, at least at particular times, like age, health, culture etc. That's why I would definitely agree with you that Epicurus would not say "women can't be sages" (though he might generalize more than we would prefer, in the same way he might say that "children" or "the very aged" or someone else who due to personal circumstance would be facing an emergency or some obstacle that infringed on their freedom of action or thought).

But again , what is a "sage"? Do we limit "sagehood" to "teachers" or "leaders of schools"? If we did that, then it would probably be possible to say that there are a wider variety of obstacles toward being such a leader, such as personality issues.

But I still tend to think that "sage" in this context means more like "any human acting wisely under their circumstances" so I personally would draw a much tighter circle on who is "incapable" of it. I would say today that "incapable" would mean mostly just some mental or physical handicap that we'd agree would have to be significant. However if we used "incapable" more broadly to mean "incapable under their current circumstances" then the net would be much wider and contain all sorts of people who due to personal circumstances have been hindered or brought to a point where they just can't see their way past the problems of the moment to a wider perspective.

In fact that approach is probably the key to what I would propose as the answer. Given enough time and education and resources virtually everyone has great potential. But if you focus on the immediate present, which is probably a very valid way to look at it since we're trying to stay away from idealism, then you have to be more practical about the question of who is capable of "being a sage" now, or next week, or next month, or next year.

So maybe I am thinking that we are sensitive about this analysis because we are looking to avoid overgeneralizing, but maybe Epicurus was just looking at the relative near term and judging more practically based on experience, and that he was in fact totally talking without reference to categories or overgeneralizing. Every time I think about Epicurus' approach to "categories" I think (Hey, that sounds like Aristotle and Plato, there are no "natural categories" in an atomist natural universe) -- and I tend to then think that Epicurus is saying "don't get caught up in categories, just look at the facts of the present and the foreseeable future."

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 1:35 PM

More on that issue of "incapable" --

Somewhere I recently saw a variation of this picture from one of the Planet of the Apes movies:



The reason it comes to mind is that I think it would be core to Epicurus that despite the talk about the gods speaking Greek, there was ultimately nothing "special" to Epicurus about Greeks or humans or any other animals or things. At least if "special" means "ordained by God" or "ordained by the Universe" then that just doesn't comport with Epicurus' system, in my view. Things are as they are without any blessing that it is "right" that they be that way, and within the limits of nature things can change dramatically over time, since there is no "fate" or "hard determinism" that things must be the way they are now, at least among "higher animals" that have agency.

Ha - I hope my graphic there isn't inappropriate. I am not really a planet of the apes fan and don't remember much of anything about those movies except the statue of liberty on the beach scene! But to me the photo has that kind of "shock" effect that maybe helps make the point that there is no divine order. We get caught up in our idealized categories when there really isn't any higher justification for them at all, other than the facts of experience as they exist today. And that can easily change quickly.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 29, 2020 at 2:10 PM

Quote

That the wise man, however, cannot exist in every state of body, nor in every nation.

When I read this I think of indoctrination, personality, disability and hierarchy of needs. For example:

A person raised in a culture (or nation) that devoutly follows a particular religion is going to have a difficult time becoming an Epicurean sage.

I know people who honestly believe that reason is the goal of man, and this complements their personality. They will never accept the primacy of the faculties and consider such an idea ridiculous.

Mental disability might present a condition where one is like a newborn or an animal, so while full comprehension wouldn't be available, one might have access to the faculties on some level.

Hierarchically (a la Maslow), lack of access to food, shelter and safety might preclude a focus on philosophy.

I don't think of any of these absolutely preventing sagehood but making it highly unlikely. Also I'm looking at this from a 21st century perspective which might relate to the "outdated" issue.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 2:19 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Sorry we just crossposted and I elaborated on my earlier post....

But I think your comment emphasizes my question. "Can't"? What does "can't" mean with a human nature possessing agency, and absence of fate?

Diogenes Laertius was compiling from who knows how many sources. Was this characteristic referring to Epicurus himself as written by one of his admiring students ("The Founder *can't* fall back into...")? Was it hyperbole ("Sages of *our* school *can't* fall back...")? The original source could shed light on the issue you're bringing up... and, of course, we can't know that.

Your question made me go back and take another look at the text:

ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν ἅπαξ γενόμενον σοφὸν μηκέτι τὴν ἐναντίαν λαμβάνειν διάθεσιν μηδὲ πλάττειν ἐκόντα:

Those words are fairly adamant that it's a one-and-done (at least according to whatever source DL was using):

- ἅπαξ once, once only, once for all
- μηκέτι no more, no longer, no further
- μηδέ and not

That's a lot of "no, nay, never, no more" as far as falling back to the opposite disposition (opposite to being a sage).

I would also say that once you know something, you can't unknow it. Once you know the truth of the "true philosophy" you can't un-know it. It's part of your knowledge. So, while someone may behave as if they were ignorant or choose to act in ways contrary to their well-being or contrary to the truth, they can't do it (or say they're doing it) from a place of ignorance.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 2:44 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I would also say that once you know something, you can't unknow it. Once you know the truth of the "true philosophy" you can't un-know it. It's part of your knowledge. So, while someone may behave as if they were ignorant or choose to act in ways contrary to their well-being or contrary to the truth, they can't do it (or say they're doing it) from a place of ignorance.

Yes that's a good way of looking at the issue, and doesn't conflict with the positions on agency and fate. And that's a good linkage to to the text we know was said about how once an Epicurean always an Epicurean, so the "can't" might be hyperbole.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 3:09 PM

In response to [Cassius](#) 's asking

Quote

what is a "sage"? Do we limit "sagehood" to "teachers" or "leaders of schools"?

I'd say that the sage, ὁ σοφός, the wise one, is anyone - from a classical Epicurean perspective - who has achieved a level of mastery over their choices and rejections that allows them to continually experience the fullness of pleasure in their life. By virtue of this, one would hope that these are the teachers and leaders of Epicurean communities but it could theoretically be anyone on the Epicurean path.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 3:20 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

who has achieved a level of mastery over their choices and rejections that allows them to continually experience the fullness of pleasure in their life.

That last part is the issue for me. If anyone deserved the title of "sage" it would be Epicurus, but at the end of his life he was himself in great pain, and I would not think he was any less a sage then than earlier. I therefore tend to think that there is always a difference between the

concept and the reality in words like this, and I don't think I would say someone is not a sage simply because there are events that are impinging on their ability to experiencing nothing but pleasure at any particular time. And yet that is the reality for virtually anyone I am familiar with, so it would seem harmful to me to use a word as an indicia of a goal that cannot be fully reached all the time.

I can certainly see the usefulness of terms like "wise man" and so forth, but the closer those terms seem to get to idealized states, the less likely do I think that Epicurus would have agreed that the terms are helpful rather than harmful.

I think this is an area where I sense the tension between conceptualization and reality, and I sense that Epicurus would have been at war with words that set false expectations. Kind of like the quote about walking around uselessly talking about the meaning of "good." That's the sense in which a word like "sage" would bother me unless strictly limited in meaning. Another analogy: Living as "gods among men" being a useful term while strictly defining "gods" as real rather than supernatural beings.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 3:37 PM

He was in pain, but there's no way to avoid physical pain if one is in a material body. We get sick. We get injured. But remember what Epicurus wrote:

Quote

"On this **blissful day**, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them ; but **over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations.**"

So even in the midst of severe physical pain, Epicurus was able to apply his philosophy and experience pleasure. He remained a sage even to the last.

From my perspective, experiencing the fullness of pleasure doesn't mean one is blissed out all the time. That's what I meant about having mastery over your choices and rejections to maximize long-term pleasure. You may be experiencing pain right now, but the sage can - so to speak - keep their eyes on the prize of long-term pleasure. They have an expansive view of their life and aren't bogged down in their present suffering... even though it might be severe (e.g., the response to "torture" characteristics). The sage keeps in mind that severe pain is short, chronic pain has moments of pleasure (at least according to the [Principal Doctrines](#)).

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 3:50 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

From my perspective, experiencing the fullness of pleasure doesn't mean one is blissed out all the time

Not sure if you have got to this part of the DeWitt book where he discusses "Fullness of pleasure" but DEFINITELY this is a term that deserves a lot of discussion. I agree with your statement there that I quoted from you, but I don't think we have a clear definition of what "sage" means or "fullness of pleasure" means in this context.

And AH-- Here I think we have to modify: "That's what I meant about having mastery over your choices and rejections to maximize long-term pleasure." I think you will agree with me on careful thought that "long-term" is a term that has to be handled carefully, as it seems to imply that the long-term is always the most desirable outlook, when the letter to Menoecus makes pretty clear that that is NOT a complete statement of the proper measure.

"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."

I know I have many times myself described the goal as "long-term pleasure" but I don't think that is tenable in light of the sentence quoted.

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 3:52 PM

Another way of stating my concern is to observe that I think it is pretty clear that the goal and the guide in Epicurean terms is "pleasure." That means that the goal of life cannot be "to be a sage" and the guide of life cannot be "a sage" or "to follow a sage," and those terms strike me as particularly hazardous if we consider "sage" to be synonymous with "a wise man" and if we consider how important it is not to embrace "wisdom" as the goal or the guide of life.

Is it possible that all this discussion of "sage" is overlay by Diogenes Laertius using his non-Epicurean philosophical categories?

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 3:55 PM

Oh, but I think "longest period" and "long-term" are two different things.

Longest period = blissed out all the time, eating at the delicious buffet of delicacies for hours and hours; making pleasure last for the longest period isn't tenable or advisable.

Long-term = "I will eat enough of this delicious food on the buffet to fully satiate myself but I'm not going to gorge myself "for the longest period I can" because I know later (i.e., long term) that will cause me pain." Long-term involves making choices and rejections with an eye to what will cause you more pleasure later or maintain your fullness of pleasure (I have not read DeWitt's section on that yet... but I do remember seeing your graphic).

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 4:16 PM

OK I tentatively have to register disagreement on where we are on that, as I do not see your distinction between longest period and long-term, and I think we are talking about the difference between things that may be poorly expressed as "quantity" vs "intensity." I see that you might be saying that we add it all up and judge it as the total at the end of one's life but I am not sure that helps us any to get past the point that "duration" is only one aspect of the measure.

I think where I am going on "fullness" (and I am not sure I recall where DeWitt went) is that "fullness of pleasure" implies "fullness of pleasure possible to you under your circumstances" and not a reference to an absolute measure in terms of quantity or intensity or any other factor.

I am thinking that this is an issue that is related to "purity" of pleasure, in which "pure pleasure" is a statement of experience in which all experience is pleasurable with no mixture of painful experience, but that even this term of "pure pleasure" does not create an absolute standard, but again a measurement of what is possible for the particular individual.

I think all this is very complicated and I am definitely open to modification but I do think firmly that comparisons of pleasure and pain are going to be relative, and that terms like quantity and purity and intensity and duration are going to be useful but always short of an "absolute" way in which we can compare various lives and say that one particular version is "best" as a rule.

(As usual I want to note that i see this is a very fun and very useful discussion!)

Post by "Don" of May 29, 2020 at 4:23 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Another way of stating my concern is to observe that I think it is pretty clear that the goal and the guide in Epicurean terms is "pleasure." That means that the goal of life cannot be "to be a sage" and the guide of life cannot be "a sage" or "to follow a sage," and those terms strike me as particularly hazardous if we consider "sage" to be synonymous with "a wise man" and if we consider how important it is not to embrace "wisdom" as the goal or the guide of life.

Is it possible that all this discussion of "sage" is overlay by Diogenes Laertius using his non-Epicurean philosophical categories?

Epicurus himself uses the term σοφός as "sage" or "wise man" in the Letter to Menoikos:

Quote

[126] The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life.

[126] ὁ δὲ σοφὸς οὔτε παραιτεῖται τὸ ζῆν > οὔτε φοβεῖται τὸ μὴ ζῆν:

So if we are to accept the Letter as being from Epicurus's own hand, he referred to "the wise man"

I wouldn't say the goal of life is to be sage but that becoming wise is a natural result of following the Epicurean path. Wisdom/prudence makes the pleasant life possible along with being just and acting rightly (PD 5). One becomes wise in applying the philosophy and these characteristicsuh, characterize (sorry) what behaviors one will exhibit by being adept at knowing how to apply the philosophy of pleasure in one's life. For those not fully proficient in the application of Epicurean philosophy, these characteristics can be a list of "fake it til you make it" behaviors. The more you practice the behaviors of a "sage" the more you'll see their usefulness if know how to make your choices.

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 4:27 PM

Yes so in that sense "being a sage" is a parallel term to "living virtuously" and I have no problem with that, but I always get ready to "shout" with Diogenes of Oinoanda whenever I think someone is elevating the means to the end.

Now I know you are far too far along to be doing that yourself, but that's definitely the impression I get from a lot of people who talk about "Epicurus the Sage" and things like that,

and I think it's a hazard that's easy to encounter. Since I am sure that you are doing it here maybe I should just say let's carry on forward 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 4:33 PM

But I do think that we still have a lot to do on the clear meaning of terms like "sage" and "fullness of pleasure." So that when Epicurus uses the term in the letter to menoeceus I would strongly presume that he is using it in a generic way and not as a term of art as in the comic book "Epicurus The Sage" for example.

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 4:52 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But I do think that we still have a lot to do on the clear meaning of terms like "sage" and "fullness of pleasure." So that when Epicurus uses the term in the letter to menoeceus I would strongly presume that he is using it in a generic way and not as a term of art as in the comic book "Epicurus The Sage" for example.

I think I would agree with that if I understand what you're saying.

In the interest of making sure I'm being clear: I do NOT think that the Epicurean sage is akin to a buddha, bodhisattva, messiah, etc. The Epicurean sage is not a type of being, an official title, or an unattainable condition that only serves to make humans feel inadequate. It's more descriptive than anything else, a shorthand. A wise one is simply one who has learned to apply the philosophy in every aspect of their lives, who has internalized the doctrines and can readily pull them up in their mind to confront any situation when trying to make choices on courses of action to reject and accept.

Although now that I'm writing this, I need to be careful in steering clear of elevating the wisdom to make the decisions with the pleasure arising from those decisions. Although again... No, okay... The decision is just the means to the pleasurable end. Just as acting virtuously is a means to achieving pleasure. Okay, I think I pulled myself out of the nose dive. 😊

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 4:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(As usual I want to note that i see this is a very fun and very useful discussion!)

Agreed!! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 4:56 PM

It is the proverbial slippery slope / walking on edge of the canyon for sure!

*And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power, to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to **fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided**, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.*

Post by “Cassius” of May 29, 2020 at 5:12 PM

And it's particularly easy since virtually EVERY other person in every other tradition takes the position that "wisdom" is the goal, and virtue is its own reward. And I probably am being overly cautious by saying "virtually."

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2020 at 8:24 PM

Here are some visual aids of what I understand to be the difference between "longest duration" pleasure and "long-term" pleasure:

Present >>>>Future



"Longest duration" refers to pleasurable experience over a single contiguous span of time leading to pain; pleasure clung to in the present with no consideration of consequences.

(ex., eating at the buffet as long as possible leading to indigestion and nausea in the future)

Present>>>>>Future



"Long-term" refers to pleasures over time punctuated by pains endured for the sake of the continued existence of the pleasure; or painful experience undergone in the present to have pleasure in the future.

(ex., Diet and exercise undergone for health and fitness)

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 9:00 PM

Well I can certainly see how longest duration can be different from "long term" pleasure using the illustration, but I am thinking that in both examples the issue being discussed is "time," while I think that "time" is probably not the only factor in judging what is the "most pleasurable" -- in that "purity" would also be a consideration, while what I am really thinking is the major issue is "intensity" -- in that one person can judge getting to the top of Mount Rushmore for a moment such an exhilarating experience that it is worth ten years of looking up at it from the foot of the mountain.

Maybe someone else can jump in and give us a different perspective?

Post by "Martin" of May 30, 2020 at 4:09 PM

Thanks Don for the link to the singular "they". I was not aware of this usage but will try to get accustomed to use it. When I wrote my comment, I hesitated for some seconds to ponder whether there might be a correct gender neutral pronoun in English and whether it would be as clumsy as the new "er/sie" and other politically correct solutions for gender neutral language in German which I still refuse.

Post by "Godfrey" of May 30, 2020 at 7:26 PM

Excellent visual aids Don!

For a different perspective, hopefully not too different, there is the idea of the best life being the pleasantest life. Opposed to that is the idea of the best life as a life of continual recurrence of unsatisfied desire, which would allow repeated opportunities for pleasure if pleasure is considered to be the satisfaction of a desire.

I'm not sure if this adds to the discussion; I'd like to think it through some more but will have to get back to it.

Post by "Cassius" of May 30, 2020 at 8:28 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

For a different perspective, hopefully not too different, there is the idea of the best life being the pleasantest life.

A large part of the question seems to be "How do we measure, or define, 'most pleasantest'?"

Post by "Godfrey" of May 30, 2020 at 9:05 PM

I'm wondering whether we need to. If the Epicurean life is guided by the pursuit of pleasure, there is no hierarchy of pleasure, and the limit of pleasure is the removal of all pain and fear,

then intensity and duration of pleasure are meaningless, practically speaking. They are useful only as rhetorical tools as in PD3 and PD9.

In other words, as long as you are pursuing a life of pleasure, what is most pleasant doesn't matter. And it can't be measured in either intensity or duration. This is why Epicurus could have such pleasure as he was dying in agony: he was still pursuing pleasure, and the pleasure of his thoughts was driving out the pain of his strangury. Similarly for a sage on the rack.

A life of pleasure is pursued moment by moment. So wouldn't the proper measurement be the feeling of pleasure in each moment? That would be duration. Wouldn't the greatest intensity then be the lack of any pain in that moment?

Post by “Don” of May 30, 2020 at 9:27 PM

I think you may be on to something here, [Godfrey](#) . If I hear you right, the pursuit of pleasure (Jefferson's pursuit of happiness) is the important part. As long as we are making choices that point us in the direction of our (subjective) pleasure, we're doing it right in the moment even if we're experiencing pain in that moment.

I found Fragment 68 to be applicable:

Quote

68. To those who are able to reason it out, the highest and surest joy is found in the stable health of the body and a firm confidence in keeping it.

According to this then, from my interpretation, the "highest... joy (pleasure)" is defined as stable health and the confidence in maintaining it. We make choices to achieve this.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 31, 2020 at 12:56 AM

I'd refer that fragment to PD3:

Quote

The limit of enjoyment is the removal of all pains. Wherever and for however long pleasure is present, there is neither bodily pain nor mental distress.

The key, I think, is the second sentence. We pursue pleasure, and do it wisely. That's something that we can control. Despite our best efforts we can't assure our good health: Epicurus was an example of that, but he still lived a life of pleasure. If he had had stable health and a firm confidence in keeping it, he would have reached the limit of pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of May 31, 2020 at 6:46 AM

This is one of the few texts I can think of that refers to a superlative experience of pleasure ("jubilation unsurpassed"):

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 7, p. 1091A: Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their “thing delighted” – their good – is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: “That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good.”

Now would it be desirable to live every moment of life experiencing "jubilation unsurpassed"? I think so, and I think this example does stand for the ability to rank some pleasures as more pleasing than others. And it may be there there is no "legitimate" "absolute" standard by which you can say that one pleasure is more pleasing than another other than saying. "I feel this pleasure is more pleasing to me than that one, or those."

But there's a lot to consider about these points.

It "might" be true, but would also be very important to flesh out and explain, that it is a core Epicurean principle that:

There there is no standard by which you can say that one pleasure is "objectively" more pleasing than another, for all people at all times, and from any "absolute"

perspective. The only proper way of comparing pleasures is from the perspective. "I feel this pleasure is more pleasing to me than that pleasure."

Would that be correct?

Post by "Don" of May 31, 2020 at 10:48 AM

It seems to me we're all on the right track moving in the same direction, maybe just in different lanes.

I agree with [Cassius](#) that there is no objective standard to judge one pleasure more pleasurable than another. Pleasure by its very nature is subjective.

Both [Godfrey](#) and I have mentioned the "pursuit." According to Attalus's website, Fragment 68 is from the following:

Quote

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 4, p. 1089D: It is this, I believe, that has driven them, seeing for themselves the absurdities to which they were reduced, to take refuge in the "painlessness" and the "stable condition of the flesh," supposing that the pleasurable life is found in thinking of this state as about to occur in people or as being achieved; for the "stable and settled condition of the flesh," and the "trustworthy expectation" of this condition contain, they say, the highest and the most assured delight for men who are able to reflect. Now to begin with, observe their conduct here, how they keep decanting this "pleasure" or "painlessness" or "stable condition" of theirs back and forth, from body to mind and then once more from mind to body.

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, IX.5.2: Epicurus makes pleasure the highest good but defines it as *sarkos eustathes katastema*, or "a well-balanced condition of the body."

So, Plutarch says Epicureans say that the "pleasurable life is found in **thinking of this state as about to occur** in people or **as being achieved**." This again emphasizes the process. It also echoes what Epicurus said about how important it is to remember past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures. We cannot have guarantees or assurances of stable health, but we can make choices that moved us in that direction. We can look forward to those future pleasures of stable health. We can be assured that we ourselves will make choices to move ourselves forward **toward** stable health (aponia) and peace of mind (ataraxia). I'm not advocating a "tranquillist" perspective but just talking about a process and attributes growing

out of that process when we're making choices about what gives us pleasure in the future and the present.

Take Plutarch again:

Quote

the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you.

From my perspective, one key word is "arises." This again implies a process.

I think there's a difference between talking about maximizing pleasure in our lives over time in the present and the future and talking about maximum pleasure of any one pleasurable event. The latter can't be measured by definition because we're talking about subjective phenomena.

This conversation is both very pleasurable for me as well as enlightening. Keep it coming!

Post by "Cassius" of May 31, 2020 at 11:02 AM

In the spirit of keeping it coming, I think:

(1) the view that it is important to "pursue" pleasure is pretty clear, we all agree on it, and stating it is not particularly controversial, at least in our circles.

(2) What is HUGELY controversial, has profound implications, and is probably NOT a consensus view, expect maybe in our smallest circle here, is the part where we say something like:

"The only proper way of comparing pleasures is from the perspective. "I feel this pleasure is more pleasing to me than that pleasure."

Huge numbers of people (almost Everyone outside our inner circle of people who are trying to interpret Epicurus rigorously) default to interpreting "virtue" as having objective content, and the worst offense in the world in their eyes is to suggest that the individual has any type of sanction from Nature to pursue "his/her own" pleasure apart from social/universal norms.

So therefore when we discuss issues like "... maximizing pleasure in our lives over time in the present and the future and talking about maximum pleasure of any one pleasurable event. The latter can't be measured by definition because we're talking about subjective phenomena."

Then we have at least a couple of levels of analysis ---

(1) The issue of being clear in our technical discussions about "ranking" and "divisions" and "types" of pleasure. Here we have a fascinating and important discussion that can be pursued with a wide variety of types of people (both inside and outside the Epicurean framework) without too much pressure from emotional issues.

But we also have :

(2) The issue of the apparent subjective/relativistic nature of pleasure, the acceptance of which is explosively rejected outside the Epicurean framework of Nature. In fact it is hard to even discuss personal attitudes toward pleasure without first coming to terms with the practical implications of concluding that people will disagree on how to pursue pleasure. That probably takes us off into the infrequently discussed issues such as the last ten PDs, and this issue (which might be the most important of which) has to be kept tightly tied to the Epicurean framework for us to make progress on dissecting it. Talking about this issue with people outside the basic Epicurean framework is hardly even possible because you run into immediate and emotional issues about what "should" be the best pleasures, and if you can't agree that that "objective" framework makes no sense then you can hardly even get off the ground.

Post by “Don” of May 31, 2020 at 11:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In the spirit of keeping it coming, I think:

(1) The issue of being clear in our technical discussions about "ranking" and "divisions" and "types" of pleasure. Here we have a fascinating and important discussion that can be pursued with a wide variety of types of people (both inside and outside the Epicurean framework) without too much pressure from emotional issues.

But we also have :

(2) The issue of the apparent subjective/relativistic nature of pleasure, the acceptance of which is explosively rejected outside the Epicurean framework of Nature. In fact it is hard to even discuss personal attitudes toward pleasure without first coming to terms with the practical implications of concluding that people will disagree on how to pursue pleasure. That probably takes us off into the infrequently discussed issues such as the last ten PDs, and this issue (which might be the most important of which) has to be

kept tightly tied to the Epicurean framework for us to make progress on dissecting it. Talking about this issue with people outside the basic Epicurean framework is hardly even possible because you run into immediate and emotional issues about what "should" be the best pleasures, and if you can't agree that that "objective" framework makes no sense then you can hardly even get off the ground.

This is good. Thanks for summarizing! Here are my thoughts.

1) I don't think we can "rank" or "divide" individual pleasures. What we can classify (for lack of a better word) are the *consequences* of pleasures. Do someone's present pleasures move them along the path to future pleasures? That's always been my argument for why we *can* censure the "pleasures of the profligate" (PD10). Their actions, while subjectively pleasurable for them in the present, do not assure them of future pleasures.

2) Again, yes, people will pursue pleasure in different ways, but: (a) are the present pleasures they experience assuring them of future pleasures? and (b) are they in keeping with natural justice: to not harm and to not be harmed? I think those are the criteria by which to "judge" pleasure (again, for lack of a better verb). There are no best pleasures, or right pleasures, or correct pleasures in and of themselves. You all here in the forum have begun to move me in that direction. I'm still wrestling with this myself because I can readily think of pleasures that people insist are pleasurable to them that I think are abhorrent. I'm also not convinced that these kinds of "pleasures" are actually pleasures and not activating some other center in the brain, but let's for arguments' sake say they are pleasurable for these people in the widest possible definition. Then we judge them by the criteria a and b above: assurance of future pleasures and accordance with natural justice. Epicurean Philosophy says that we should accept some pain for future pleasures. I'm thinking here of rehab for the profligate's drug addiction, for example.

That's my take (at least in this moment 😊 ... I could change my mind)

Post by "Godfrey" of May 31, 2020 at 1:48 PM

Quote

There there is no standard by which you can say that one pleasure is "objectively" more pleasing than another, for all people at all times, and from any "absolute" perspective. The only proper way of comparing pleasures is from the perspective. "I feel this pleasure is more pleasing to me than that pleasure."

I agree but would take this a step further and say "I feel this pleasure is more pleasing to me than that pleasure *at this moment*." This of course takes into account my goals and my favorite pleasures, and evaluates both the current pleasure and the consequences thereof. This is the "process."

Post by "Cassius" of May 31, 2020 at 5:06 PM

Ok this moves us as expected into the area of interpreting "natural justice."

Do we all here agree that there is no absolute standard of natural justice? And that the "harmed or be harmed" reference is simply something similar to a statement of virtue, which much be translated into the "pleasure" of the people involved? And that when the individuals no longer agree on their pleasures, there is no longer any natural justice involved in the issue of "harmed or be harmed"?

I suspect that in this discussion so far everyone will largely agree that the answer to that question is "yes, there is no absolute justice" - but probably not without hesitation. I think in most all discussions of this we find that this is one of the least discussed areas of the PDs because many people do not want to see the clear statement here that Epicurus is saying that no individual's version of "justice" is applicable to all times and all people and all places. And of course since most people are dedicated to their pre-existing absolute standards of "virtue" they find these impossible to accept as written. The temptation is therefore to think that there is an absolute standard of "harm or be harmed" but that is not likely at all to be the case given the nature of the Epicurean universe, where there are no absolute standards other than the pleasure and pain of the people involved, correct?

33. Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another, in any place whatever, and at any time, it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed.

34. Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions.

35. It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if, at present, he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape.

36. In its general aspect, justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country, or any other circumstances, the same thing does not turn out to be just for all.

37. Among actions which are sanctioned as just by law, that which is proved, on examination, to be of advantage, in the requirements of men's dealings with one another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law, and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice. And even if the advantage in the matter of justice shifts from one side to the other, but for a while accords with the general concept, it is nonetheless just for that period, in the eyes of those who do not confound themselves with empty sounds, but look to the actual facts.

38. Where, provided the circumstances have not been altered, actions which were considered just have been shown not to accord with the general concept, in actual practice, then they are not just. But where, when circumstances have changed, the same actions which were sanctioned as just no longer lead to advantage, they were just at the time, when they were of advantage for the dealings of fellow-citizens with one another, but subsequently they are no longer just, when no longer of advantage.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 31, 2020 at 7:28 PM

Speaking "doctrinally," it's pretty explicit. In addition to the doctrines cited above, there is

Quote

[PD31](#): Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed.

A Google search of natural justice comes up with something along the lines of procedural fairness in the execution of the law. (Cassius this is your area of expertise, I'm just a layman finding my way 😊)

Justice is also a rare example of a prolepsis in the extant texts; I interpret the prolepsis as a rudimentary "sense of fairness." I think that this relates to equality.... An equal opportunity to pursue pleasure. But also if someone harms me, that gives them unequal power over me unless the harm is corrected. Which could then impact my safety.

Post by "Don" of May 31, 2020 at 7:42 PM

[Cassius](#) wrote:

Quote

I suspect that in this discussion so far everyone will largely agree that the answer to that question is "yes, there is no absolute justice" - but probably not without hesitation.

I'll admit I have hesitation when it comes to not having an absolute standard of justice. I consider something like equality for all genders and races to be universal. Can I justify this on Epicurean grounds? Maybe. Epicurus didn't see a problem with having women and slaves be an active part of the Epicurean community. The "standard" of neither harmed or be harmed comes into play arguably, too. But Epicurus did own slaves. Isn't slavery a universal injustice? Doesn't it do harm to those enslaved. Epicurus freed at least some of his slaves in his will, so he must have seen the value in setting them free. But are we going to argue that slavery was just when it was practiced in Ancient Greece? But not just in 19th century America? We have [PD38](#) to refer to:

Quote

...actions which were considered just have been shown not to accord with the general concept, in actual practice, then they are not just.

Is slavery "not to accord with the general concept"? Is gender equality "not to accord with the general concept"? If so, are these universals? If not, why not?

I agree that this subject is not easy. But if we are to call ourselves Epicureans, we need to wrestle with it. If we can't come to grips with what we believe Epicurus is saying, then maybe we're not Epicureans but rather humanists or atheists or agnostics or something else. If I want to call myself something, I have to understand what that means. If I can't defend or follow a path, I need to step off that path and find another. I admit I'm willing to look at what it means to call myself an Epicurean right now. If I find I can't agree or defend an Epicurean perspective, I'll find another path. BUT I think it's important to discuss and argue these fundamental points. It will either strengthen my Epicurean resolve or demonstrate to myself that I'm maybe not an Epicurean after all. This opportunity to talk through these issues is truly one of the values in finding this forum.

Post by "Cassius" of May 31, 2020 at 8:06 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

This opportunity to talk through these issues is truly one of the values in finding this forum.

Definitely!

[Quote from Don](#)

. I consider something like equality for all genders and races to be universal.

Ok here is my interpretation, I think "slavery" as you mentioned is probably the ultimate emotional test, but these are good too.

I think where Epicurus was going is to recognize BOTH that:

(1) Our feeling is the ultimate guide for life, and that means that we will die for things that we feel to be important enough to us like friends, or whatever we happen to feel at that level of intensity, which would include our political values of equality or whatever we feel intensely about. The "friends" example is the one I use here because Epicurus explicitly is recorded to have said that we will on appropriate occasions die for our friends.

(2) That despite the intensity of our feelings and our personal willingness on appropriate occasions to fight and die for our feelings, we still have to admit that these are OUR feelings, and that they aren't sanctioned by "God" or even by some cosmic "Nature." The ultimately is no prime mover / supernatural / teleological "right" and "wrong" in the universe, and we justify our actions based on the only guide we have - our individual senses of pleasure and pain, just like all other animals do.

This is ultimately why I react so strongly against the "passivist" or the "tranquility above all" view of Epicurus, because that conflicts totally with the view that we stake all our actions to the flag of feeling. There is no way that I could accept that Epicurus (or we) would turn our backs on our friends, or on the basic values that motivate us, just so we could eke out a few extra moments of "tranquility" in our cave with our bread and water and cheese. There is NO WAY that Epicurus advocated such a position. We could go on and on listing and arguing the reasons for that conclusion, and that is in fact why I spend so much time on it and think it is so essential, but ultimately I think Epicurus would tell us that we grasp this not really intellectually, but through **feeling**.

I know that it is shocking to a lot of people to give up the argument that there is some "higher sanction" for their personal views of right and wrong, but I can't think of anything in the Epicurean physics (the nature of the universe) that would allow such a position. In fact everything in it goes in the opposite direction - that the universe is truly ultimately reducible to

combinations of matter and void that are constantly changing, and in such a system there is no room for Platonic ideals or any other kind of "universal" or "absolute" rules of right and wrong.

But at the same time, we do and should fight to the death, just like all other animals do, for our ultimate feelings about what is important to us in life.

That's why the tranquilist view is to me not just intellectually and factually "incorrect" based on the record, but totally unacceptable and irreconcilable at a basic feeling / emotional level with the thrust of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of June 1, 2020 at 8:20 AM

Of course I wake up this morning thinking about this thread and have another comment: I am very much in the camp that is sort of captured by "you only live once" - but that doesn't really capture the issue. Given our Epicurean understanding that life is so short in comparison with the infinity of time when we will not exist, how can we possibly NOT want to use our lives as productively as possible? Of course the initial question has to be asked as to what "as productively as possible means" but that is where Epicurus points us to the answer in a way that virtually no one else does. Do we really want to get to the end of our lives and think that we spent our brief lives "avoiding pain"? That the best use of our time was to be bunkered down in our cave, even with a few friends, with bread and water?

I will repeat again there is NO WAY I can imagine Epicurus advocating such a position. That is pure Stoicism!

Epicurean philosophy is the creed of a fighter, not a coward.

Vatican Saying 47. I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and I have closed off every one of your devious entrances. And we will not give ourselves up as captives, to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who cling to it maundering, we will leave from life singing aloud a glorious triumph-song on how nicely we lived.

Note 47. Translation by C.Yapijakis, Epicurean Garden of Athens, Greece .Bailey: "I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and entrenched myself against all thy secret attacks. And I will not give myself up as captive to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for me to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who vainly cling to it, I will leave life crying aloud a glorious triumph-song that I have lived well."

Post by "Cassius" of June 1, 2020 at 8:56 AM

Here is an example of the conflict, in a place I saw this morning where i will need to genericize the message so as to maintain confidentiality.

The context is that one of us (not me) pointed out to a new contact (not someone who posts here as far as I know) that there were significant differences between Epicurus and Benthamite utilitarianism.

The post from "our side" was responding to a positive comment about Bentham, and made the point:

.... Bentham was not Epicurean-- Epicureans are most definitely not social utilitarians. The only reason we would want to "add to the sum total of human happiness" is if that was the most effective way to increase our individual pleasure. Personal pleasure always is central, which is the point I thought you were making on the post.

Below is the reply from this new person, which I believe to be incorrect, but which states the problem clearly. I have highlighted and underlined (this was not in the original) the point being made, which is the point that I do not believe can be supported by Epicurean philosophy, and in fact made impossible by it. While we can and I would say SHOULD choose this course in many cases, there is nothing in the philosophy that calls for this kind of "natural rights" conclusion. What would be the source of such a "right"? Who or what would vindicate it?

We can choose such a system because it may in our context give us pleasure to participate in it and pain not to do so, but would anyone really advocate that ALL people deserve such respect in ALL situations? It's easy to think about examples of people who we believe we justifiably detest, and to whom we would not recognize in them a "right" for them to experience pleasure in ways with which we violently disagree. The ultimate insight of Epicurean cosmology is that the universe doesn't say who is right and wrong, and that if we expect 'our' view of pleasure and pain to be implemented it is entirely up to us to do so.

Here's the excerpt of this person's reply:

"I don't think that Bentham is in conflict with classical Epicureanism on any of these questions, and I don't think his position is 'counter' to classical Epicureanism, but rather a development of it: an attempt to build a more universal system on solidly Epicurean foundations.

The problem with classical Epicureanism, and the one that Bentham sets out to solve, is what happens when one person's pleasure conflicts with another's.

The crucial and I think deeply ethical point is the egalitarianism in Bentham: the idea that MY pleasure should not take priority over YOURS, no matter who I am, what my

status is, how rich I am, how intelligent I am, or whatever. Each individual has an equal right to have their happiness respected.

I think that there is an interesting distinction between a) taking responsibility for something, b) working towards something, and c) respecting the right to something.

A) I can only take responsibility for my own happiness. This is in fact a Stoic doctrine, other people's happiness is outside your control and you should not be suckered into trying to deliver it.

~~I can work towards the happiness~~ *I can work towards the happiness of those around me. I think we can all agree that this is a wise course of action as this happiness is reflected back. I think you agree on this.*

C) I respect the equal right of other people to pursue their own happiness. (As you can see 'equal' means in society at large, not in my own personal priorities: there's a difference). In fact, your message above also agrees with this: when you say 'some will be counter-protesting for their own pleasure', and you don't condemn this action, you are in fact recognizing that equal right.

So given this a/b/c set of values, there is no conflict at all between Epicurus and Bentham: one is simply a rational extension of the other.

End of excerpt

This is the kind of issue we come back to again and again and again, and need to think clearly about so we understand the implications.