

# Emotional states from an epicurean pov

**Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of July 18, 2020 at 11:34 AM**

Hello all,

something I have been thinking about lately is emotional states, specifically negative ones. It seems to me feeling anxious or feeling down (not clinically but simply for a period of time) are very painful, however I completely disagree with the Stoics who give techniques to manage or even repress these emotions as that leads to an unhappy life and eventually a distrust of emotions.

An Epicurean will feel his or hers emotions more deeply, but our goal overall is pleasure and everything should be oriented to feeling real pleasure (as opposed the potential pleasure or virtue, as we say in Ireland “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”. Should we therefore try not to feel our negative emotions deeply?

Also as a side note, the tranquility epicurean view seems to silly and also unacceptable. Who can stop themselves from feeling pain? Anxiety or sadness can occur for any reason or no reason at all.

My thoughts are simply now to examine the feeling and see what purpose it is serving me, am I having thoughts causing it or is it the result of an action? Is it warning me of something painful?

Taking its usefulness into regard, it seems preferable to feel anxiety and sadness sometimes (again not clinical such as anxiety disorder or depression, get help if you suffer from these) but only if it can help identify a threat of further pain or it can help identify an action we took which lead to this anxiety so we can avoid it in the future.

In this regard we Epicureans have a “friendly” relationship with our healthy emotional (non clinical) even if they are painful. It’s very different than other philosophies such as stoicism and Christianity which threat negative emotions as enemies no matter what (even if they aid in obtaining pleasure) or in the latter case proof of your guilt.

My thoughts are still fresh in thinking about this so forgive my unrefined writings, what are your thoughts on this?

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**Post by “Don” of July 18, 2020 at 12:50 PM**

I agree. If we are to use our emotions or feelings or pathē as criteria for our choices and avoidances, we had better be able to listen to them. From my perspective, Epicurus was telling us to use pleasure and pain as our stop and go signals. You can't just go, go, go. We have both pleasurable and painful emotions. If we're feeling a painful emotion, why? What's the cause? How can we use that to make a choice to avoid that cause? Or are we experiencing that painful emotion in order to achieve pleasure later? Suppressing specific emotions cuts one off from half one's criteria for prudent decisions.

I hope I characterized your thoughts correctly in my contribution here. Good topic!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2020 at 2:24 PM**

#### [Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

In this regard we Epicureans have a “friendly” relationship with our healthy emotions (non clinical) even if they are painful.

Yes I completely agree with this characterization and approach, and with what Don said. We do want to experience as much pleasure, and as little pain, as possible, but that doesn't come by “dumbing down” the faculty of feeling but by organizing our physical and mental lives so that we have as many pleasurable experiences / events, and as few painful experiences / events, as possible. If we were ever truly successful in suppressing the faculty of feeling pain we would doubtlessly veer off into disaster, which is pretty much exactly what Stoics do -- by suppressing feeling they deny themselves the only things in life that are worthwhile -- experiences of pleasure.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of July 18, 2020 at 4:47 PM**

I completely agree with all of the above. To go off on somewhat of a tangent: those who suppress their pain no longer have fully functioning physical/emotional faculties as noted above. So to what do they resort? Reason. This is one pathway to placing reason on a pedestal, which often leads to obviously bizarre conclusions. There are no longer any valid “checks and balances” for their ruminations.

Just another place where Epicurus got it right, by placing reason subordinate to the Canon.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2020 at 4:53 PM**

That's one of the places I generally place "reason" in quotes, or refer to it as "logic" or "abstract reason" or "rationalism" - since it hardly seems "reasonable" from an Epicurean point of view to cut off one of your main faculties of gathering information about the world. I suppose my preferred term of all is "rationalism" but it's always good to come up with new ways of describing the problem.

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**Post by “SamJ” of July 18, 2020 at 8:16 PM**

I may have swerved a little off on a tangent but I feel that this article that Martin Ferguson Smith (Epicurean scholar) wrote in a Shetland newspaper (he lives on a remote island of approx 30 people in the Shetlands) neatly expresses Epicureanism in a really great way which helps with this discussion topic.

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**Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2020 at 8:31 PM**

Yes saw that and thanks for posting the link. I read it and discussed it with a couple of others but we decided not to "promote" it because MFS personally seems to have more of a "minimalism" view of Epicurus than I think I am comfortable with promoting. He's undoubtedly one of the greatest living scholars on Epicurus and certainly on Diogenes of Oinoanda, and of course when he says something it deserves respect.

My concerns relate to the recent ongoing discussion that we have had in the thread primarily started by [Don](#)

For example:

exists in the sense that fools make a hell of their lives on earth. At the same time those who live wisely can enjoy a godlike happiness.

Such happiness is experienced by those who live a simple life, satisfying those desires that are natural and necessary, such as those for essential food, drink, clothing, and shelter, and eliminating those, like the desires for wealth, status, and sensual pleasures, that are unnecessary and, because they are impossible to satisfy, certain to involve pain.

Well, yes, and we all know the passage about Epicurus saying that bread and water is basically all he needed to compete with the gods in happiness. And yet I don't think it is correct to say flatly that "godlike happiness" will necessarily be experienced "by those who live a simple life, satisfying those desires that are natural and necessary, and eliminating ... those that are unnecessary....

I think we who are deeply read in Epicurus understand the context in which MFS is writing, but is this really clearly enough stated to promote to those who don't understand the contextual nature of these considerations?

Also:

Epicurus would have hoped that, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, his teachings would help the sick to bear their illness with equanimity and the rest of us to keep our worries, fears, frustrations, and disappointments in perspective, to be as calm and positive as possible, rejoicing in our good health if we are lucky enough to retain it, and in general to count our blessings, including those of love and friendship, possession of which was very important to him and his school. Probably he would have hoped also that his teachings would help us to review the way many of us have been living our lives and to reassess our priorities and values.

Again, well - yes -- but would Epicurus have had nothing to say about the specific actions that should be taken to guard against contracting the disease, against spreading it, and doing the research necessary to find cures? Would Epicurus just have passively accepted the situation and not considered it to be a challenge to his scientific nature, a challenge to be met with vigorous research and action?

(and that's the analogy I draw to the conversation with Don. I see Epicurus as an ACTIVIST, as a scientific researcher and "crusader" for more pleasure and less pain, and not as the kind of

stoic-like personality who is concerned primarily with controlling reactions to things that we resign ourselves to be out of our control.

I hate to make these negative comments and that's why I haven't affirmatively posted about the article. It doubtless contains a lot of good scholarship and I have nothing but respect and appreciation for Martin Ferguson Smith.

But I do see our work here in the forum as a matter of both understanding and getting a more clear picture of what Epicurus really taught, and I am afraid in regard to MFS (at least in this article, I don't know what else he has published lately) I am afraid that his viewpoint represents a consensus that isn't really informed by the DeWitt perspective, and (if I thought it were completely accurate) would be a major turn-off to me in pursuing Epicurus as of more than historical interest.

So as a final word, in terms of how the article relates to the points raised in this thread by Eoghan, I am afraid I think that the article probably is more reflective of the kind of viewpoint that Eoghan is posting against, rather than for.

But this is very good addition to the thread and I hope others will comment on this.

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### **Post by "SamJ" of July 19, 2020 at 6:26 PM**

Thanks Cassius, I think you've provided some interesting insight.

I particularly liked what you said about:

#### Quote

I see Epicurus as an ACTIVIST, as a scientific researcher and "crusader" for more pleasure and less pain, and not as the kind of stoic-like personality who is concerned primarily with controlling reactions to things that we resign ourselves to be out of our control.

I hadn't considered this perspective and I think it is really interesting.

I also had not thought that this article was reflective of the viewpoint of what Eoghan was posting against rather than for. So for me I have some useful angles to further explore.

Thanks

**Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2020 at 8:23 PM**

Samj these comments are pretty much an ongoing theme for me, but I try not to be TOO heavy-handed, especially when dealing with someone like MFS for whom I have tremendous respect. I am afraid the comments apply more so to the current/younger generation of Epicurean commentators, who I think probably have less excuse than does MFS who is hopefully going to be around a long time, but is getting up in years. I want to see Epicurean philosophy appeal to everyone, especially younger people who can start a new generation of it, and I think that it's important to stress to younger people, most of whom are not naturally stoic, that the "Stoic" interpretation of Epicurus is by no means the only one. And in large part this is also why I stress DeWitt so much, because his approach to teaching Epicurus, in my experience does not lead toward the "stoic" interpretation.