

What In Your Opinion Are the Most Essential Characteristics Of "Being An Epicurean" (According to Epicurus)?

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2021 at 10:24 AM

I am eventually going to expand this poll over to Facebook and perhaps other sites, but I thought this would be the best place to start so we can get an idea of what answers definitely ought to be listed in the checkbox options. What I am thinking of here is very general, and it's probably best not to overthink it. Everyone here is familiar with the basic doctrines of Epicurus, so please pick five from the following that you think are most essential to what "you" subjectively apply in your own mind as a test of what it means to be "an Epicurean." Don't qualify your answer in terms of "being an Epicurean today" or "being an Epicurean in ancient Greece," or in any other limited way. But don't totally redefine the word, either - let's use "Epicurean" in the way that Epicurus would have used it.

What do you *feel in your gut* Epicurus himself would tell you is what it means to be an Epicurean?

Please comment to add additional options to the poll.

You may select a maximum of seven from this list.

Post by "Don" of February 15, 2021 at 3:07 PM

I still have issues with the phrasing of "Pleasure is the goal of life." Not the intent of the phrase, but the phrasing! I think that that phrase is open to misunderstanding, misinterpretation, etc. The concept itself is of fundamental importance to Epicurus's philosophy, but I advocate for a different way of phrasing it. "Pleasure is the goal of life" strikes me -- and I'm betting would strike a beginner -- as "If I'm not feeling warm and fuzzy every minute, I'm obviously 'doing it wrong'." Using pleasure and pain "to steer your own little boat" towards the most pleasurable life is the goal.

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2021 at 3:37 PM

Can you suggest better wording? Just pull a phrase out of the letter to Menoeceus about pleasure being the alpha and omega of a blessed life? Or from the Torquatus letter that pleasure is ... (rewording only slightly) "the final and ultimate Good, and the End to which all other things are means, while not itself a means to anything else."

This is obviously a huge phrasing issue.... and maybe itself something for listing as alternatives withing such a "poll"

Post by “Don” of February 15, 2021 at 4:54 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Can you suggest better wording?

LOL. It's easier to be critical than to offer solutions. 😊 Here's my first attempt at being constructive...

Epicurus says in the Letter to Menoikeus that "The goal of a completely happy life is 'health of the body' and 'serenity of the soul'" but that's open to misinterpretation, too, isn't it? He also says "Pleasure is the beginning (αρχή) and the end (τέλος) of a completely happy life." I may translate/paraphrase that as "Pleasure is the foundation and result of a completely fulfilled life." And he also writes "When we say that pleasure is the goal, [we mean], by sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject, and driving out opinions that cause the greatest trouble in the soul."

I don't think any of these are good bumper sticker slogans but each has something to contribute to getting the "goal" across.

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2021 at 5:01 PM

i think what you are talking about is that the needs of expressing a philosophy as a logical proposition are different from those needed for personal motivation among non-philosophers.

Torquatus' formulation to me now seems clearly contextual for the professional philosophy audience, which is also my view of the "absence of pain" statement. Neither are suitable for

explaining to a layman what it means to be an Epicurean. Which I think helps explain why his school was called by his name, rather than the "Hedonist" or "Pleasant" school.

It has always been true for me that "pleasure is the goal" is more of a rejection of rationalism and religion than it is a positive statement of what Epicurus is all about.

So in my view the whole discussion about pleasure is a component of the logical whole, not a standalone slogan, and I think I need to emphasize that more.

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2021 at 6:09 PM

Here's another angle on that same point:

Maybe the Greeks were also used to debating these issues in terms of competing "gods." For example it's clear that in [Philebus](#), Plato has Socrates and [Philebus](#) talking in terms of a competition between their patron gods / goddesses:

Quote

SOCRATES: Then let us begin with the goddess herself, of whom [Philebus](#) says that she is called Aphrodite, but that her real name is Pleasure.

PROTARCHUS: Very good.

SOCRATES: The awe which I always feel, Protarchus, about the names of the gods is more than human—it exceeds all other fears. And now I would not sin against Aphrodite by naming her amiss; let her be called what she pleases. But Pleasure I know to be manifold, and with her, as I was just now saying, we must begin, and consider what her nature is. She has one name, and therefore you would imagine that she is one; and yet surely she takes the most varied and even unlike forms. For do we not say that the intemperate has pleasure, and that the temperate has pleasure in his very temperance,—that the fool is pleased when he is full of foolish fancies and hopes, and that the wise man has pleasure in his wisdom? and how foolish would any one be who affirmed that all these opposite pleasures are severally alike!

Quote

SOCRATES: Nor would pain, [Philebus](#), be perfectly evil. And therefore the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good. But now—admitting, if

you like, that pleasure is of the nature of the infinite—in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and [Philebus](#), can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind? And let us be careful, for I think that the danger will be very serious if we err on this point.

[PHILEBUS](#): You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.

SOCRATES: And you, my friend, are also magnifying your favourite goddess; but still I must beg you to answer the question.

And also Lucretius of course starts out his poem by talking about Venus.

So maybe where we find it artificial to talk about "Pleasure" as the goal, it was much more natural for the ancients to talk in terms of Venus symbolizing a guiding force or life force, as opposed to other gods (Zeus, or someone representing personified reason? -- Who is [Philebus](#) referring to as Socrates' favorite god?). So I wouldn't go too far with this at the moment without thinking further, but maybe for people who personified Pleasure as Venus it was much less of a problem to talk in terms of Pleasure or Venus / Aphrodite more interchangeably, and it was less of a mental hurdle than we have today.

At the very least I would expect that equating pleasure in one's mind as Venus was a much more reverential or "serious" way of thinking about pleasure than is evoked by the word in our minds today.

EDIT: Maybe this comment is another reason, in accord with my recent semi-joking comment, that it would be a legitimate option for some group of modern Epicureans to go ahead and embrace Venus as our "patron" goddess in a more actual "religious" sense. Even today it might be a lot more intellectually helpful to say that we "follow Venus" rather than "follow pleasure."

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2021 at 7:43 PM

Hopefully this discussion will produce some good material for us to discuss well into the future. I am thinking of developing a discussion format around this in which we could conduct an online discussion of how to "rank" these elements. visually, I think we can collaborate in an interview format with something like this, the purpose of which would be to rearrange the elements into the interviewees preferred format and ordering:



Essentials of Being Epicurean

1. The person holds that Epicurus's views of the existence of divine beings is an important part of Epicurean philosophy.
2. The person holds that it is not necessary to live eternally in order to experience a full life.
3. The person holds that morality, including justice, is relative to the goal of pleasure, and not absolute.
4. The person holds that the "pleasure" which Epicurus held to be the goal of life includes joy and delight and active pleasures, and means more than "absence of pain."
5. The person holds that pleasure is the goal of life.
6. The person holds that sensation, rather than "logic," is the foundation of knowledge.
7. The person holds that the ultimate particles have the ability to swerve and therefore humans have a degree of "free will."
8. The person holds that the universe is eternal in time.
9. The person holds that the universe is infinite in size.
10. The person holds that the universe is material in nature.
11. The person holds that there are no supernatural gods.
12. The person holds that there is no life after death.
13. The person holds that virtue is instrumental to pleasure and not an end in itself.

Post by "Matt" of February 15, 2021 at 8:00 PM

That's a good poll...hard to just pick 7!

Anything that focuses on pleasure first and foremost, a severe skepticism to anything "supernatural", the understanding of the materiality of the universe, an "agnosticism" or apathy to any concrete nature of divinity other than what is posited by Epicurus.

In absence of any actual virtue or divine mandate, pleasure would in my opinion, be the default "good" in life.

Post by "Godfrey" of February 15, 2021 at 8:30 PM

Before I clicked on the title to read this thread, not knowing it was a poll, I gave a bit of thought to how I would describe pleasure as a characteristic of an Epicurean. For what it's worth, I came up with "consciously pursues choices and avoidances in order to live a life of maximum pleasure."

That's pretty unwieldy. I think that these two quotes are an excellent starting point:

[Quote from Don](#)

Using pleasure and pain "to steer your own little boat" towards the most pleasurable life is the goal.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Even today it might be a lot more intellectually helpful to say that we "follow Venus" rather than "follow pleasure."

Post by "Bryan" of February 15, 2021 at 9:25 PM

As we know, Epicurus stood in disagreement with Plato who argued for the existence of mixed pleasures (μικτὰ ἡδοναί), which Plato imagined as pleasures which contained an aspect of pain. In reality, as Epicurus understood, pain and pleasure are mutually exclusive at any particular point in the body. Epicurus also stood in disagreement against the Κυρηναϊκοί/Cyrenaics who viewed the removal of pain as a state of calm to which pleasure could then be added.

"It is not possible for the Good to be placed anywhere, when neither What is painful nor What is distressing is any longer making way for it" Metrodorus (Non Posse 1091 B) ἔνθα γὰρ τεθήσεται Τάγαθόν οὐκ ἔστιν ὅταν μηθὲν ἔτι ὑπεξίη μήτε Ἀλγεινὸν μήτε Λυπηρόν.

It is common for people to consider the removal of pain/discomfort/desire to be the beginning of pleasure. In fact, the removal of pain/discomfort/desire and resulting painless state that exists, is exactly what pleasure is. Full physical contentment is naturally and frequently achieved when we have the natural and necessary accommodations of food and shelter.

"Τοῦτο αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθόν ἐστι: τὸ φυγεῖν τὸ κακόν- This very thing is the good: Escaping from the bad" Metrodorus (Non Posse 1091 A)

In failing to appreciate this fact, the common man, when he is in a painless state, typically tries to add to his complete pleasure by engaging in further activities. Yet any attempt to add more pleasure to the complete pleasure of painlessness must always lead to failure, and never allows the mind to settle. The common man chases variation of bodily pleasures because he is not mentally content.

Yet full mental contentment can be achieved just as naturally and frequently as full bodily contentment -- by the very realization of the simple ease of obtaining bodily contentment and then fostering gratitude and a full appreciation for your success in doing so.

"**For the end of all our actions** is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid ; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure. Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life (DL X 128)." An Epicurean's **goal** is bodily comfort and a calm mind.

Post by "Elayne" of February 15, 2021 at 10:04 PM

[Bryan](#) As you say, Epicurus denied a mixed state-- however, he also did not propose a neutral state. There is not pain, pleasure, and calm-- and he was clearly speaking of actual pleasure. So when pain is fully relieved, it isn't replaced with some sort of calm void but with bliss, real pleasure-- and that is why a person having full blown pleasure doesn't desire to go looking for more at the moment (although continuing to arrange for future pleasures would be wise). It isn't because of a logical argument but because that person is totally satisfied-- there would be no such thing as more pleasure. You can't add more water to a full cup. Complete pleasure is not some sort of subtle, easily missed feeling.

What he warned against was going for pleasures one could never obtain, or of course those which brought more pain than they were worth in terms of pleasure.

When Epicurus talks about variety, it is not in a disparaging way... and good thing, because neurologically, we do have to rotate pleasures to some degree, even cognitive pleasures, or our nervous systems quit noticing the stimulus.

Post by "Cassius" of February 16, 2021 at 12:55 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1884-what-in-your-opinion-are-the-most-essential-characteristics-of-being-an-epicurean/>

I see that Bryan strongly liked Elayne's post. My question is this: does anyone think that Elayne and Bryan are not in full agreement in these two posts (10 and 11)?

If you think these posts are not in full agreement, can you articulate why you think they are not?

If you think these two posts are in full agreement, please articulate what seems most important to you about their agreement.

And I would be curious to know the response to this question by Bryan and Elayne too - do you guys see yourselves in these two posts to be in complete agreement? If not, why not?

As time goes by - regardless of what Elayne and Bryan say from here - I think it would be very helpful to hear from anyone who has time to answer my question about how they think these two posts do or do not fit together.

Post by “Cassius” of February 16, 2021 at 1:11 AM

As if my last question is not deep enough already, I will say that I suspect that Bryan's post was spurred by the wording of the poll option which reads: "The person holds that the "pleasure" which Epicurus held to be the goal of life includes joy and delight and active pleasures, and means more than "absence of pain.""

In comparing Elayne's post to Bryan's post, it might be helpful to consider whether Elayne and Bryan appear to be on the same page in their implicit agreement or disagreement with that wording.

To repeat, it would be interesting to hear from anyone on whether they think these posts are in agreement or disagreement, regardless of what Bryan or Elayne may say in subsequent posts, because it will be helpful to discuss not only the substance of what each post says, but the form in which the post is phrased.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 16, 2021 at 2:04 AM

I think Bryan and Elayne are saying the same thing, but I don't want to put words in their mouths and would like to read their comments. I do have a comment on the practical detail of

Bryan's post however.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Full physical contentment is naturally and frequently achieved when we have the natural and necessary accommodations of food and shelter.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Yet full mental contentment can be achieved just as naturally and frequently as full bodily contentment -- by the very realization of the simple ease of obtaining bodily contentment and then fostering gratitude and a full appreciation for your success in doing so.

To me, these quotes are overly simplified (maybe intentionally?). I presume (correct me if I'm wrong) that most of us reading this have adequate food and shelter yet many of us have physical/medical issues that prevent full physical pleasure. And mental pleasures and pains have a major influence on physical well-being which may be either positive or negative. As a material body and soul, each individual has intricately intertwined mental and physical needs, desires, fears and pleasures which contribute to full contentment. The classic example is, of course, Epicurus feeling the fullness of pleasure while dying from strangury. But I think it's far more common for a person's mental distress to cause pain in the body despite adequate food and shelter.

Gratitude is a powerful tool, but a person must also apply the Canon and reason to their mental distress(es). Epicurus's extant writings show how this is done for the fears of the gods and death. I suspect that many other issues were dealt with through the use of frank speech in ancient Epicurean communities, although I'm not aware of any extant documentation.

Post by “Elayne” of February 16, 2021 at 12:21 PM

I thought we were saying something different and was glad to see the ♥ in case I added useful information. Bryan's post focused on physical pleasure but in a way that seemed somewhat minimalist to me... whereas I read Epicurus as promoting both mental and physical pleasures, but noting that mental pleasures can predominate and become accessible at all times. One must take physical action, such as engaging in friendships, in order to have material for ongoing mental and physical pleasures-- rather than being passive.

There's a risk with talk of calmness and gratitude in forgetting that quite a bit of action is generally needed to secure our pleasures, rather than passively trying to be glad about whatever happens, no matter what that is. When dying, Epicurus took pleasure in memories of combined mental/physical pleasures (because an encounter with friends is both) which he had taken action to experience. So it's not just that we get a roof, a coat, and food and then focus on being calm. We actively arrange for pleasurable experiences.

A person can gain such skill at mental pleasures as to successfully enjoy life even during physical pain, but the reverse is not true-- no type of physical pleasures can enduringly compensate for mental pain. And this is not to say we would neglect or disdain physical pleasures!

Post by "Cassius" of February 16, 2021 at 12:33 PM

Yes when Godfrey thinks that the two posts are saying the same thing, and Elayne thinks they are not, I think we have a lot to explore in clarifying what is being said. And that's a difference of opinion already among us who I think read these posts closely - which means that others who are less closely reading may be puzzled even more.

Post by "Cassius" of February 16, 2021 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Full physical contentment is naturally and frequently achieved when we have the natural and necessary accommodations of food and shelter. In failing to appreciate this fact, the common man, when he in a painless state, typically tries to add to his complete pleasure by engaging in further activities. Yet any attempt to add more pleasure to the complete pleasure of painlessness must always lead to failure, and never allows the mind to settle. Yet full mental contentment can be achieved just as naturally and frequently as full bodily contentment -- by the very realization of the simple ease of obtaining bodily contentment and then fostering gratitude and a full appreciation for your success in doing so.

I don't want to overemphasize this part of the discussion, because I think there are lots of aspects of how posts 10 and 11 relate to each other that are worth discussing. But certainly in my own experience I have seen it argued fairly regularly that views such as stated here would

lead to the conclusion that it would never be appropriate to emerge from a subsistence level of existence. Now maybe that conclusion is in fact the position that Epicurus and/or some Epicureans sought to argue, but before we can discuss whether they were right or wrong to argue that position, I don't think we have clarity or consensus that this was in fact what some or all or any of them argued.

It seems to me that this is a pretty profound question and it is all wrapped up in what is meant by the "absence of pain" analysis. And that makes it triply important to be clear in how we discuss it. Are Bryan and Elayne agreeing, or strongly disagreeing? Is there a perspective - a way to approach the question -- in which the two positions can be seen to agree, or to disagree, according to the perspective taken?