

Epicurean philosophy vs. Stoicism in public popularity

Post by “Titus” of March 12, 2021 at 7:26 PM

While writing on another commentary, I tried to check for online boards focused on Stoicism. 10 years before they seemed to be much more elaborated as a community than the lone standing Epicureans. I think the degree of organisation and connecting has improved a lot since then and the content production has risen dramatically in Epicureanism. The website "NeoStoa" respectively "the stoic registry" is declining (though offering online courses with tuition). Nevertheless, people on facebook are still more adorned to Stoicism than to Epicurean philosophy. At first glance, they enjoy intensive discussions there.

Do you have any idea, why the Stoics are still more popular than the Epicurean system of thought? My personal thesis is, that one point may be an easier applicability of Stoicism in the way of being a more abstract philosophy. You don't need to learn about the world as a whole and make your conclusions like in Epicureanism. There are lone standing "techniques", mutually intelligible with other popularized systems of thought like Zen Buddhism etc.

I don't think there is necessarily a need for more audience - sometimes it may feel even more exclusive 😎

What are your hypotheses and ideas? Did they start earlier spreading the internet or fit better in already existing structures? What are your observations?

Post by “Cassius” of March 12, 2021 at 8:15 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

fit better in already existing structures?

I would say that is the key. I think Stoicism is actually the majority view of most "establishments" in the corporate and governmental and academic world, even if they don't admit it. The prevailing worldview in my eyes is some version of "virtue ethics" in which most existing institutions have their view of what is "good" and seek to apply that to everyone, and that is highly consistent with the Stoic worldview. Stoicism doesn't require overt belief in a

particular theology, but it serves much the same function as traditional religion, so it's easy to move back and forth between the two, even if one considers oneself secular / humanist, and still be in the same general area.

Epicurean philosophy is much more 'revolutionary' and "anti-establishment" in rejecting even the possibility of uniform rules of conduct for everyone, other than by agreement, and the idea of placing "pleasure" at the core of how life is to be lived is still frowned upon by almost every other camp.

And also in the mix is that Epicurean philosophy really doesn't lend itself to a hierarchical tightly-organized framework that is conducive to money-making or power, and that in itself is a huge incentive for people who are after one or the other to focus on Stoicism rather than Epicurus.

No doubt there are lots of other factors too but those stand out in my mind.

I think the hurdle that Epicureans failed to cross in the ancient world, and that has to be crossed today, is that if it is every going to thrive as a substantial force it has to find a way to translate the emphasis on "Friendship" into the realization that the world is a dangerous place and that it is necessary for people of similar perspectives to band together in order to survive. The core philosophical elements of that are present, especially in the last ten PDs. Hopefully the internet age will allow that need to finally come together to reality.

Post by "Don" of March 13, 2021 at 5:49 AM

Interesting thread. I also saw the other techniques thread. Here are some thoughts off the top of my head...

Stoicism (along with Aristotle) got accepted and rationalized into the Christian club early on. The whole [first chapter of the Gospel of John](#) talks about Jesus being the Logos/Word, a concept [straight out of Stoicism and Greek Philosophy](#). In some ways, Stoicism glorifies the bearing up against suffering and pain, the stiff upper lip, even voluntarily undertaking painful experiences to "train" yourself (Stoics) or "purify" yourself (Christianity). Stoics also saw pleasure as dangerous, and this also was the view of the Christian Church Fathers. This all could fit in with the Christian worldview and so Stoicism could "go stealth" and its tenets could never really die out as a dominant Western worldview. Look at the connotation of "stoic" - it's generally deemed positive by society: bearing up under pressure, not succumbing to emotional reactions, rational.

Now, consider "epicurean": decadent, fussy, snobbish, elitist. It's becoming more positive in a foodie culture, but overall I'd say it has a more negative connotation in society at large.

Christians and thus Western culture have had more than a millennia and a half to denigrate the memory and philosophy of Epicurus. And Epicurus's physics have gone mainstream since the renaissance (thanks in large part to Lucretius), but not under Epicurus's name. They've taken the bathwater but left the baby behind.

Because of this established connotation of small e "epicureans" it creates a hurdle to get people to think they might be capital E "Epicureans." Stoics could also capitalize on the macho, tough-guy, warrior stereotype and target that audience. What's the natural audience for Epicureans? (I genuinely don't have an answer. Thoughts?)

I also think the penchant for referring to Epicurean philosophy as EP is off-putting. It's very in-group jargony with no semantic content to a wider world. It reminds me of [TM](#) or [EST](#). I may be reopening the can of worms by saying this, but I see no issue with using the terms Epicurean and Epicureanism. It makes a much more immediate contrast with Stoicism in people's minds. We're not Epicureanists anymore than they're Stoicists. Practicing Epicureanism vs practicing Stoicism sets up a definite choice for people. Both, in my opinion, are philosophies of personal responsibility. Both offer definite life paths and ways to set your priorities. But one glorifies overcoming pain (Stoic); one emphasizes seeking pleasure. There are also a number of "techniques" that can be gleaned from Epicurus, Lucretius, Philodemus, and the fragments. But more on that later...

Post by "Cassius" of March 13, 2021 at 7:34 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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[Quote from Don](#)

What's the natural audience for Epicureans? (I genuinely don't have an answer. Thoughts?)

I think these questions are related. I agree that the issue of the "ism" terminology is lost on most modern English speakers (hard for me to be sure about other languages) and I don't think the question should be made a priority in dealing with someone who doesn't see the point. I do think that some interesting points can be made by discussion the question of "isms," because there are lots of aspects of Epicurean philosophy beyond just the role of pleasure and pain, which is why a label such as "Pleasurism" or even "Hedonism" doesn't work for me, and why I

never use the "Hedonist" label. Discussing the issue of what "Epicureanism" is helps flesh out that it's more than just a system of ethics. But the way most people understand the "ism" suffix (in my experience) is that it just means "system of thought" and there's nothing necessarily negative about that.

The natural audience probably would be a subset of whatever type person it is who wants a coherent system of thought - not everyone seems to want or care about having one. I don't know that this should always be true, but it seems to be a lot easier to identify the type of person who is naturally "not an Epicurean" than "naturally is an Epicurean." There's definitely a list of attributes that can be identified, though, and among them would be the degree to which a person values thinking independently from the larger group. The issue isn't a matter of objecting for the sake of objecting, or naturally being uncooperative, but more a matter of determination to follow one's own sense of pleasure and pain rather than taking those cues from the larger society.

Post by “Don” of March 13, 2021 at 9:34 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

There's definitely a list of attributes that can be identified, though, and among them would be the degree to which a person values thinking independently from the larger group.

I suppose a natural audience would be secularists, humanists, and freethinkers. But that's a very diverse group and fragmented (like our sources).

The modern Stoics seem to have targeted the "go-getter" business-type and plugged into the "warrior ethos" thing and leaned into that in their philosophy and promotion. The whole "rugged individualist" would appeal to an American audience, too.

I do want to say that it appears to me that many of the modern Stoics truly practice what they preach and appear to be sincere in their drive to resurrect and rebuild Stoicism, and seem to have plugged into a need out there in the world. Now, there are probably dozens of relatively well-selling and popular Stoic "self-help" books, Stoicon-type events and resources, etc. They definitely got a headstart on the Epicureans in that respect. There are way more relatively well-known Stoic authors and speakers than there are Epicurean ones. Who is it on our side? Hiram Crespo and Catherine Wilson? That's about it. With Hiram, I'm specifically referring to his chapter in "How to Live a Good Life: A Guide to Choosing Your Personal Philosophy" by Massimo Pigliucci (Look at that, a leading Stoic voice!) Those two are probably the go-to "Epicureans" now if the popular press would want to include an "Epicurean" perspective on something.

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2021 at 10:20 AM

In these categories (secularists, humanists) and in the two names you mentioned (i've left out freethinkers), I think there is a key problem in that there is not yet a full and dramatic separation from the "virtue ethics" approach that's probably close to the root of Stoicism. For example I have a lot of appreciation for Catherine Wilson but I think her books fail to draw a distinction between her own personal social preferences (which we all have) from the philosophical underpinnings. Every time we represent our own ethical choices to be "the Epicurean view" on an ethical controversy, I think we bury the ultimate point deeper -- that there is no basis in the philosophy for representing that our own choices are the "correct" one. In that I think each of the categories are adopting the Stoic "one size fits all" approach, and that's deadly for the contextual and sensation-based roots of Epicurean thinking. In my view they are essentially Stoics, just taking the position that their own view of what's pleasing to them should be adopted by everyone as part of the philosophy. I'm no expert on Kant but wasn't that his view -- to be valid a position has to be extensible to everyone everywhere all the time?

I think to be philosophically consistent you have to do both -- affirm (1) that you understand that there is no single "good" for everyone, and your choices are no more justified by gods or idealism than anyone else's, while at the same time (2) asserting that your and your friends who see things the same way are going to pursue, to the best of your ability, your own version of the best way of life independently from those who see things differently.

[Quote from Don](#)

I suppose a natural audience would be secularists, humanists, and freethinkers.

It's so frustrating because one would think exactly that, but in my experience those groups have been no better than average, or maybe possibly worse as target audiences. Possibly in large part because many who have joined those camps have done so more due to their rejection of establishment morality as a personal preference rather than because they recognized that there is no idealist or religious basis for the establishment view. Either they are into virtue ethics and remaking the world in their own vision, or they are rebels without a cause, rejecting Epicurean efforts at systematic thought as much as they reject any other.

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2021 at 10:27 AM

Another point --- It's very easy to simply say. "Follow pleasure!" and things like "Do what makes you happy!" but to have a philosophical movement, you have to explain why your point of view is correct, and why the absolutist ethical viewpoints are not valid. It can be very easy and superficial to talk about pleasure and happiness -- everyone sort of acknowledges the desirability of those things - but Epicurean philosophy is really a comprehensive view of the nature of the universe that when followed to its logical conclusions totally invalidates the absolutist approach. When you start talking in those terms, you pretty quickly move from being an amusing oddity to the establishment toward being a revolutionary threat to everything they believe in and hold dear, and that's a totally different ballgame.

Not many people are ready or willing or able to take Epicurean philosophy to its logical conclusions. Anchoring and leaving the discussion at the "Follow pleasure" level guarantees that most people won't give a second thought to taking you seriously.

Post by "Don" of March 13, 2021 at 10:47 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurean philosophy is really a comprehensive view of the nature of the universe that when followed to its logical conclusions totally invalidates the absolutist approach.

Well, people generally don't like ambiguity. They like simple answers to complex questions. Black and white, not grey. Epicureanism makes you do the work.

Post by "Don" of March 13, 2021 at 11:14 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Anchoring and leaving the discussion at the "Follow pleasure" level guarantees that most people won't give a second thought to taking you seriously.

Additionally, I contend we need to be careful even with the slogan "Follow pleasure" not being caricatured* or cliched into "if it feels good, do it." It easily veers into a Cyrenaic path in people's minds (not that they know who Cyrenaics were). Epicurus did not deal in Platonic ideals, but he did recommend paths that - through observation - would lead to more

pleasurable lives overall.

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2021 at 3:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

They like simple answers to complex questions. Black and white, not grey. Epicureanism makes you do the work.

Yep I think it is a combination of SIMPLE plus (to many) "distasteful," and I think probaby the "distaste" outweighs the "simplicity" issue. On that point here's one of the sections of "A Few Days In Athens" I think is well stated:

Quote

“It might seem strange,” said Metrodorus, “that the pedantry of Aristotle should find so many imitators, and his dark sayings so many believers, in a city, too, now graced and enlightened by the simple language, and simple doctrines of an Epicurus. — But the language of truth is too simple for inexperienced ears. We start in search of knowledge, like the demigods of old in search of adventure, prepared to encounter giants, to scale mountains, to pierce into Tartarean gulfs, and to carry off our prize from the grip of some dark enchanter, invulnerable to all save to charmed weapons and deity-gifted assailants. To find none of all these things, but, in their stead, a smooth road through a pleasant country, with a familiar guide to direct our curiosity, and point out the beauties of the landscape, disappoints us of all exploit and all notoriety; and our vanity turns but too often from the fair and open champaigne, into error’s dark labyrinths, where we mistake mystery for wisdom, pedantry for knowledge, and prejudice for virtue.”

“I admit the truth of the metaphor,” said Theon. “But may we not simplify too much as well as too little? May we not push investigation beyond the limits assigned to human reason, and, with a boldness approaching to profanity, tear, without removing, the veil which enwraps the mysteries of creation from our scrutiny?”

“Without challenging the meaning of the terms you have employed,” said Metrodorus, “I would observe, that there is little danger of our pushing investigation too far. Unhappily the limits prescribed to us by our few and imperfect senses must ever cramp the sphere of our observation, as compared to the boundless range of things; and that even when we shall have strained and improved our senses to the uttermost. We trace

an effect to a cause, and that cause to another cause, and so on, till we hold some few links of a chain, whose extent like the charmed circle, is without beginning as without end.”

Post by “Godfrey” of March 13, 2021 at 5:10 PM

To take it a little further, the major theme of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is about an academic who literally drove himself insane doing the work of answering abstract questions. No mention in the book of Epicurus, who could have saved him a lot of grief. There is a little in the book about the pressures and "standards" of academia which very much agrees with the idea that Epicurus' philosophy is way too simple for the "pros."

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2021 at 7:47 PM

Godfrey if that is a theme of "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" - which I have never read - I would be interested in whether there are also parallels to Lucian's "Hermotimus" - if you have read that. I think of Hermotimus as one of the best arguments against chasing too many rabbits, but I did not realize that that was an aspect of "ZATAOMM"

Post by “Godfrey” of March 13, 2021 at 9:04 PM

I haven't read Hermotimus so I can't compare them. I'm about halfway through Zen &c. I think Joshua described it as steeped in Plato and I agree with that. It's basically three interwoven threads: a father-son motorcycle trip, ruminations on the virtues of understanding technology, and a "Chautauqua" attempting to tie together and advance the academic development of philosophy (minus Epicurus, of course). That, and the first person narrator is piecing together the life of Phaedrus, who is himself teaching rhetoric before he went insane and had electroshock therapy. Plenty to chew on!

Post by “Don” of March 14, 2021 at 10:52 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yep I think it is a combination of SIMPLE plus (to many) "distasteful," and I think probaby the "distaste" outweighs the "simplicity" issue.

In the US at least, distrust and distaste of pleasure was baked in from the 1600s with the Puritans and Pilgrims.

Post by “Joshua” of March 15, 2021 at 6:31 PM

I dislike the term "virtue-signalling", which I think is dismissive and overused, but it may have some relevance here.

What Person A says: "I think virtue is the highest good."

What Person B hears: "I am virtuous, and can be trusted to act 'morally'."

Said A. "I think pleasure is the highest good."

Heard B. "I am selfish, and plan on doing whatever I damn well please."

Now, what would I *like* Person B to hear?

"I'll be seeking pleasure today, if it doesn't cause too much collateral pain, or else interfere with my usual obligations; if you're not too busy, perhaps we can seek it together? How about a pleasant lunch?"

Post by “Cassius” of March 15, 2021 at 9:20 PM

Yes "virtue-signaling" has a modern political charge to it which I don't mean to invoke in any direction. It is fairly well descriptive though, which is why I have used it somewhat, especially since the issue of 'virtue' is so closely associated with stoicism and the direction Epicurus sought to break away from.

It would definitely be good to develop additional terms to describe the overuse of "virtue-based-analysis"

Post by “Elayne” of March 18, 2021 at 4:55 PM

Well... I do exactly plan on doing as I please, with no qualifiers! It's just that what I please involves taking pleasure in the pleasure of others, not that I'm trying to avoid causing trouble or disrupting my schedule for reasons unrelated to pleasure.

Person B needs to know what kind of person I am-- that my pleasure includes empathy-- and that I care about them. Then they should want me to be selfish for their own sake!

I just got back from a 2 hr round trip to take my son for his first COVID19 vaccine. They are hard to get in my county, so I took him out of state, because he is high risk. I didn't do that bc of an obligation or virtue or trying to balance things out-- I did it only bc I love my son, and I enjoy doing things for him.

Post by “Don” of March 18, 2021 at 11:28 PM

It sounds to me like [Elayne](#) is embodying KD5:

Quote

KD5: It is not possible to live a pleasurable life without the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice; and it is impossible to live with wisdom, morality, and justice without living pleurably. When one of these is lacking, it is impossible to live a pleasurable life.

Virtues like empathy, compassion, altruism are not ends unto themselves but are traits that can spring from our desire for -- and can lead to -- our personal experience of pleasure. We don't practice virtues (however that's defined) because it's the "right" thing to do; we practice virtues because it leads to a pleasurable life.

As I understand [Elayne](#) 's post (please correct me if I'm misinterpreting):

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Well... I do exactly plan on doing as I please, with no qualifiers! It's just that what I please involves taking pleasure in the pleasure of others, not that I'm trying to avoid causing trouble or disrupting my schedule for reasons unrelated to pleasure.

It actually seems you are in fact adding qualifiers right away:

I do exactly plan on doing as I please which involves taking pleasure in the pleasure of others.

Which seems to uphold the tenets of KD5. [Elayne](#) is not going to purposefully cause pain to others because she takes pleasure in the pleasure of others.

Likewise, if we value our own pleasure, the most intelligent choice is to be kind to others since that engenders goodwill, creates bonds of friendship and love (among colleagues, partners, family members, etc.), and so increases the likelihood that our personal pleasure is more secure. This use of intelligent choice seems to me to be acting virtuously. [Elayne](#) even says:

Quote

[Person B] should want me to be selfish for their own sake!

This seems to be similar to what the psychologists, Buddhists, et al. call "selfish altruism" or "intelligent selfishness":

- <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/m...lating-kindness>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-con...shness-altruism>
- <https://www.skepticspath.org/blog/how-to-be...ish-dalai-lama/>

Which leads me to ask: What if someone does what the average person would call selfish "morally reprehensible" actions but derives personal pleasure from them?

I'll fully agree that Epicurus's philosophy does not endorse Platonic ideals. There is no "ideal" form of beauty, chairs, Truth, etc. The philosophy clearly states that there is no absolute god-given moral authority, it's based on societal agreements and "don't harm; don't be harmed." Plus he wrote "all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good [good, blessing, benefit, useful to us], not all pleasure is choiceworthy."

He doesn't say it's right, morally or ethically good, just basically that all pleasure is "positive" but just because it's positive doesn't make it choice-worthy. And pain is not always to be fled from. In fact, the pleasure "choice" and pain "shunned" use the same roots that Epicurus consistently uses where "choice" and "avoidances" show up in translations.

Epicurus clearly tried to break sharply away from "virtue for virtue's sake." Virtue, he taught, was instrumental to pleasure and thus to leading a pleasurable life. So, it seems to me that Epicureans are still going to act virtuously to the outside observer. The inner motivation is

going to be far different than the Stoic or Aristotelian, but the visible form/action is going to be similar.

I get the impression from time to time that some people want to say there's no absolute moral authority to define morality in Epicurean philosophy, so anything goes as long as the person is experiencing Pleasure in the moment.

I don't accept this. A pleasurable life is the goal. Epicurus says that's only possible if you act virtuously; and vice versa: if you act virtuously, you'll have a better chance of living pleurably.

People who take pleasure in what the average human would find morally or ethically repugnant aren't living according to Epicurean principles and so we would have reason to intervene and attempt to get them to change. Just because they are feeling pleasure doesn't make their life choice-worthy. I wrestle with this, but the more I think about it, the more I'm coming to these conclusions.

Post by “Cassius” of March 19, 2021 at 7:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Which seems to uphold the tenets of KD5. Elayne is not going to purposefully cause pain to others because she takes pleasure in the pleasure of others.

The seed in this comment that has the potential to grow out of proportion is the unqualified "others."

[Quote from Don](#)

Which leads me to ask: What if someone does what the average person would call selfish "morally reprehensible" actions but derives personal pleasure from them?

If in fact, per [PD10](#), he achieves pleasure, then in fact there is nothing to criticize. Where you're going of course is that depending on circumstances "some" other people (those who disagree) can be expected to react negatively. That's a purely practical concern, but an important one.

[Quote from Don](#)

So, it seems to me that Epicureans are still going to act virtuously to the outside observer.

And that's where I think the danger lies. If applied as written, this gives an automatic veto power over your conduct to the unqualified "outside observer" and that would be deferring to an outside force that has no more natural or idealist authority than anything Plato or Moses came up with. Of course in most cases the "outside observer" actually does exist, in distinction from Plato's idealism or Moses' God, which do not exist, so the "outside observer" has to be dealt with.

And that's where Epicurus is in my view very specific as to the core ways to deal with them (and I bet you know what I am about to cite):

Quote

39. The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus.

In other words, I think the key is that you do not give unqualified "Others" veto power over the goals you choose for your life. You certainly have a practical problem with those who have political power over you, but there are ways to deal with that too (Cassius Longinus followed one such alternative) and it is generally possible to consider variations on "refraining from mixing" or "expelling from your life" as well.

Absolutely there are practical issues involved in "others" resisting your preferred choices, but there are major distinctions between your family and friends being resistant (and in those cases you have a much heavier concern about THEIR pleasure) as opposed to those who are much more distant from you, about whom you probably have little concern as to their views, and Epicurus is clearly addressing those situations and pointing the way to the response.

As one small example that seems appropriate, if we here in this group did not enforce rules to separate ourselves from the Stoic and Religious majorities, this group would quickly cease to exist. We try to do that in stages, being nice and diplomatic at first to see if such a person can be persuaded to at least our general positions, and become tolerable and productive here, but progressively enforcing the rules of conduct and eventually expelling them entirely when they prove incompatible to our happiness and goals here.

I see that as pretty much exactly what Epicurus was saying about life in general, in which of course it is much harder to accomplish that, but not different in principle.

Post by “Elayne” of March 19, 2021 at 8:09 AM

[Don](#) that's not a qualifier-- it's just a description of what I like to do, not a restraint separate from my pleasure. And yes, it's in the spirit of PD5. Because virtues have no meaning other than as tools for pleasure. It would be weird to remove my awareness of future consequences from actions in the present-- that seems much more convoluted and unnatural to try and live purely for the present moment, at least for me, lol. So that's not a qualifier either. What I like to do is always in the context of my regular brain. Whether my brain is normal or not, I can't say ☐☐.

I disagree strongly about any implied absolute meaning for virtue common to all humans. If Epicurus was saying that, and I don't think he was, he would have been wrong. There can't biologically be one set of behaviors leading to a pleasurable life for every single human. And even for a single human, it's not wise to make any fixed virtue that could override pleasure-- there can be extenuating circumstances, such as the classic murderer asking for your friend's whereabouts. So no virtue like honesty is fixed. Everything is relative to pleasure.

For most of us, natural empathy provides the pro-social pleasure motive. For some, fear of consequences provides the reason to abstain from harming others, which Epicurus mentioned multiple times. However, it is easy to observe that some high functioning low empathy humans have enough financial resources to protect themselves from at least some degree of asocial if not downright anti-social living. And _if_ they have pleasurable lives that way, free from both anxiety and painful punishment, only they can give testimony. It's definitely risky to live outside the typical human virtue preferences, but it can be done. Those are the folks I try to avoid strenuously!

The reason we try to talk them out of it is for our own benefit. As Epicurus said, laws are for the protection of the wise.

Post by “Elayne” of March 19, 2021 at 8:17 AM

[Cassius](#) yes, I agree. In regards to the "others", this varies widely between individuals. I have an unusual degree of feeling based empathy, to the point that observing violence causes my body to hurt at the site of another person's injury. So I actually get pain even at the pain of others who are strangers or enemies. I refrain from causing harm because of that.

It's not completely symmetric on the vicarious pleasure end. I do get strong pleasure at knowledge or witnessing pleasure of strangers, very close to as strong as for those I love but

not quite. However, I get no pleasure from the pleasure of those I dislike, and the reason is partly that I dislike them due to what they get pleasure from. If they get pleasure from cruelty to others, then their pleasures are directly counter to mine, and I feel no joy when they get their way.

Post by “Don” of March 19, 2021 at 8:47 AM

I suspected my post would elicit some discussion. This is good! I don't have time this morning to respond to everything, but wanted to comment specifically to [Elayne](#) 's comment:

[Quote from Elayne](#)

[Don](#) that's not a qualifier-- it's just a description of what I like to do, not a restraint separate from my pleasure.

I think we're splitting hairs. Merriam-Webster's definition of qualifier is:

a word (such as an adjective) or word group that limits or modifies the meaning of another word (such as a noun) or word group

That's what your phrase is doing.

I do exactly plan on doing as I please.

What do you do?

That *which involves taking pleasure in the pleasure of others.*

I don't have any problem with that sentiment. In fact it's laudable, not that you should care what I think. But it definitely qualifies/describes what you please to do. You can't say "no qualifiers" and then add a statement defining what you please to do means to you.

PS: I should add that I realize that your qualifier/modifier is contextual. If someone is harming someone you care about (or you're being harmed yourself), you would have no qualms about NOT concerning yourself with the pleasure of the other, the attacker in this case. Nor would I.

Post by “Don” of March 19, 2021 at 8:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If in fact, per [PD10](#), he achieves pleasure, then in fact there is nothing to criticize.

I knew [PD10](#) was going to come up. 😊 I know we've tangled on this before, and while I accept your premise you present here, I reject that that is what Epicurus was saying. He did not observe that the person described in [PD10](#) *would* realistically "achieve" nor *could* expect to achieve pleasure. I believe Epicurus was saying exactly what he meant here (after looking at the verb forms used) and in the Menoikeus Letter. I'm going to be obstinate on this point. To use an Epicurean pun: I'm pig-headed in this.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If applied as written, this gives an automatic veto power over your conduct to the unqualified "outside observer" and that would be deferring to an outside force that has no more natural or idealist authority than anything Plato or Moses came up with.

I should be more clear. I'm not implying veto power to anyone. What I'm saying is that if the Epicurean acts virtuously from a desire for their own pleasure, the outside observer sees this and assumes (incorrectly!) that the Epicurean is acting virtuously for virtue's sake. The 3rd party assumes a particular motivation for the virtuous behavior they observe. That motivation, however, is not the Epicurean's motivation. The outward appearance may be similar to the Stoic's or Peripatetic's, but the actions spring from a completely different set of motivations.

And the Epicurean need not dissuade the 3rd party from their assumptions. That's the 3rd party's problem.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In other words, I think the key is that you do not give unqualified "Others" veto power over the goals you choose for your life.

Oh, yeah. I knew 39 was all queued up. 😊 And I agree with this, as what I stated above may imply.

Overall, I don't have much to quibble with in your response unless I'm missing something... Other than our divergent interpretations of [PD10](#).

Post by "Don" of March 19, 2021 at 10:17 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

It would be weird to remove my awareness of future consequences from actions in the present--

I think it would be weird, too, so I'm curious where you're getting that from what's posted. From my perspective, the "awareness of future consequences" is the heart of any practice of Epicurean philosophy. That's the basis for all choices and rejections: how do actions in the present affect my current and future experience of pleasure.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I disagree strongly about any implied absolute meaning for virtue common to all humans. If Epicurus was saying that, and I don't think he was, he would have been wrong.

So, do you disagree with PD 5 then? Why does Epicurus single out living prudently, morally, and justly if not recognizing them as "virtues" consistent with a pleasurable life across a wide swath of people? These traits lead - by observation - to more pleasurable living. Why wouldn't he endorse them?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

There can't biologically be one set of behaviors leading to a pleasurable life for every single human.

That's just not true. There are any number of behaviors that will consistently and verifiably lead to a more pleasurable life for any organism. Nature gives plenty of examples of behaviors that make an organism "fit" that are applicable across populations. Humans are no exception. I'm not saying every human being is going to have every common behavior, but I think you're going overboard to say there aren't *any* common behaviors that would be conducive to a pleasurable life. A pleasurable life is free from anxiety, want, pain, etc. There are common actions to take to achieve that.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

And even for a single human, it's not wise to make any fixed virtue that could override pleasure-- there can be extenuating circumstances, such as the classic murderer asking for your friend's whereabouts. So no virtue like honesty is fixed. Everything is relative to pleasure.

I don't have any argument with this. I'm not advocating overriding pleasure by virtue. Virtue is **always** in service to pleasure. There isn't any absolute virtue that's followed 100% of the time. Virtuous activity and the degree to which it's carried out is always relative to the situation and context. Stoics would say that. Epicureans would say that. In any case, honesty isn't the appropriate virtue here in your scenario anyway. You're throwing up a red herring. Here the virtuous act is protecting your friend. Anyone who says that being 100% truthful at all times is living in a utopian fantasy.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

For most of us, natural empathy provides the pro-social pleasure motive. For some, fear of consequences provides the reason to abstain from harming others, which Epicurus mentioned multiple times. However, it is easy to observe that some high functioning low empathy humans have enough financial resources to protect themselves from at least some degree of asocial if not downright anti-social living. And *_if_* they have pleasurable lives that way, free from both anxiety and painful punishment, only they can give testimony. It's definitely risky to live outside the typical human virtue preferences, but it can be done. Those are the folks I try to avoid strenuously!

I understand your saying "only they can give testimony," but people can convince themselves - or try to convince others - of most anything. I would find it difficult to accept the idea that a misanthropic, antisocial person feels pleasure at their lives. That's a lot of psychological pain to work through. But it's also not my place to worry about them unless I have to interact with them... Which, as you say, it is best to simply avoid them per Epicurus's advice.

Post by “Protonus” of March 19, 2021 at 10:58 PM

I think the popularity of Stoicism is largely a part of ignorance. I didn't even know about Epicureanism until I started seriously studying Epictetus. His own issues with it made me really curious about Epicureanism... and here I am today.

When I read social media posts of Stoics bashing Epicureanism I do see a decent set of people showing how they have it wrong. I still think Stoic methods of being indifferent to **select** things to be very useful, but to me it really misses the point of life, and due to its religious foundation I expect it'll become less and less popular among humanists and scientists.

Post by “Don” of March 19, 2021 at 11:14 PM

Welcome to the discussion, [Protonus](#) !

I do believe also that just not many people are aware of Epicureanism as an option.

The Stoic "indifference" and thus dichotomy of control even has antecedents in Epicurus's philosophy. I think it's a Greek thing and not unique to the Stoics.

But I think Epicurus is on sounder footing overall with respect to this and ... Well, everything else, too:

Quote

Letter to Menoikeus (Diogenes Laertius, book X: 127): Remember that what will be is not completely within our control nor completely outside our control, so that we will not completely expect it to happen nor be completely disappointed if it does not happen.

And...

Quote

Vatican Saying 14: We are born only once and cannot be born twice, and must forever live no more. You don't control tomorrow, yet you postpone joy. Life is ruined by putting things off, and each of us dies without truly living. [Emphasis added]

And...

Quote

Vatican Saying 64: The esteem of others is outside our control; we must attend instead to healing ourselves.

Post by “Protonus” of March 19, 2021 at 11:24 PM

Thanks [Don](#). Those are great quotes, I especially love that 2nd quote!

I assume that the context means "each of us dies without truly living" by postponing joy?

Post by “Don” of March 19, 2021 at 11:29 PM

[Quote from Protonus](#)

I assume that the context means "each of us dies without truly living" by postponing joy?

That's probably not a bad way of summarizing. We only have one life and are not both twice. If you don't experience a pleasurable life now, you've missed your opportunity.

Post by "Cassius" of March 20, 2021 at 1:24 AM

Yes welcome to the conversation Protonus....! You're dropping in as you can probably tell on a long-running sparring over some of these issues, even though I think we are very largely in agreement.

However I pick out these two quotes to make a particular point:

[Quote from Don](#)

Virtuous activity and the degree to which it's carried out is always relative to the situation and context. Stoics would say that.

[Quote from Don](#)

Anyone who says that being 100% truthful at all times is living in a utopian fantasy.

I certainly agree with the second, but I do think that that is exactly what the Stoics would urge, and thus that the first of these two quotes is not historically correct. It is my understanding of the Stoics that they DID view virtue as something that was absolute, and thus to be applied regardless of context. It's my understanding that they thought that there was a way to define all of the virtues, especially courage, wisdom, justice, etc -- in a way that did apply to everyone all the time and everywhere, regardless of circumstance. Of course I believe it's pretty easy to show that that is foolish (as in the example of lying to the burglar or murderer) but it's my understanding that they took the position that one would not lie even under those circumstances. They (and I think the Platonists and Aristotelians too) did seem to think that due to their theological view of the universe that it was possible to identify virtue as an absolute ideal, and so this is a stark and important point that has to always be kept in mind.

Unless I am shown that I need to revise my understanding of the Stoics or others on this point I think that I'm probably correct, and this isn't just a minor point but perhaps why we keep

sparring over [PD10](#). Truly I think that Epicurus held that the word virtue and all of its particular instances has NO MEANING unless it actually leads to pleasure, so he basically held the word to be without content except as defined in a particular circumstance, which is exactly what the Stoics et al fought against --- they refused to accept modifications of their ideals based on context, and would have considered the very idea to be blasphemous.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2021 at 8:02 AM

I'll admit the Stoic mention was a throwaway line. I freely admit I shouldn't have thrown that in there because i don't know enough about the Stoics to say that unequivocally. I'mma gonna take that back. So...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Unless I am shown that i need to revise my understanding of the Stoics or others on this point I think that I'm probably correct,

I'll concede this, but...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

and this isn't just a minor point but perhaps why we keep sparring over [PD10](#). Truly I think that Epicurus held that the word virtue and all of its particular instances has NO MEANING unless it actually leads to pleasure, so he basically held the word to be without content except as defined in a particular circumstance,

I don't think [PD10](#) has anything to do with virtue. Let me be clear. The cautions Epicurus lays out in opposition to the profligate life in [PD10](#) has *nothing* to do with whether it's "virtuous" or not. Zero. And there's no question whether the "lost" in [PD10](#) experiences pleasure. They do. The reason that those life choices can be cautioned against is that they do not - from observation over time and multiple instances - do not reliably lead to a lifetime of pleasure. Trying to say that they do or can is living in a utopian hypothetical fantasy world. And Epicurus urged people to live in the real natural material cosmos. You can experience pleasure for a bit if you do this, but that path is not choice-worthy. You have been warned.

Post by “Elayne” of March 20, 2021 at 8:14 AM

[Don](#) No, a descriptor is not the same as a qualifier. A qualifier, as you accurately say, limits or modifies -- and I am doing neither. If my description were a qualifier, it would mean that I am not only doing as I please but am limiting or modifying my scope of action beyond doing as I please. And that's not the case.

In PD5, Epicurus does not idealize the words prudently, morally, and justly. He doesn't put forth a concept of prudence that would result in the same action for every human in every situation. This is an example of why it's important to recall the context of the entire philosophy, which is without such absolutes.

We actually do have evidence that psychopaths lack vicarious pain and can even feel pleasure instead. I stand by my assertion that for feeling, only the person actually experiencing the feeling knows what it is, exactly. But we do have supportive research. It's important not to extrapolate feelings you or I might have to those of psychopaths. I think that leads to errors in predicting their behavior towards us. <https://www.webmd.com/brain/news/201...-feel-your-pain>

I am going to be bold and say that for any specific behavior/virtue you want to name as universally leading to a maximally pleasurable human life, I can name an exception. Virtues depend on pleasure for their very definition-- but feeling is a direct experience and can't be defined away. This is central to understanding Epicurus.

In fact, this issue is key to the differences between us and Stoics, and in the difficulties we face in attracting as much interest. People resist understanding that nothing defines pleasure other than the direct experience. Maximum pleasure is not modified or limited by definitions or concepts-- it simply occurs or does not.

I think it's our culture having integrated so much Stoic and Platonic thought that makes people resist this reality-- even here, on an Epicurean platform! But it's possible there is some evolved neuro-developmental barrier as well.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2021 at 8:28 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

No, a descriptor is not the same as a qualifier. A qualifier, as you accurately say, limits or modifies -- and I am doing neither. If my description were a qualifier, it would mean that I am not only doing as I please but am limiting or modifying my scope of action beyond doing as I please. And that's not the case.

I still think we're splitting hairs. I'm using modifier, descriptor, and qualifier as synonyms. Maybe that's sloppy, maybe not. You're using each with a specific narrow definition from what I can see. This could spiral down a sophist rabbit hole, so I'm content to abandon this particular thread.

I do want to respond to your other points, but that'll be a bit later.

Post by “Cassius” of March 20, 2021 at 10:01 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I am going to be bold and say that for any specific behavior/virtue you want to name as universally leading to a maximally pleasurable human life, I can name an exception. Virtues depend on pleasure for their very definition-- but feeling is a direct experience and can't be defined away. This is central to understanding Epicurus.

In fact, this issue is key to the differences between us and Stoics, and in the difficulties we face in attracting as much interest. People resist understanding that nothing defines pleasure other than the direct experience. Maximum pleasure is not modified or limited by definitions or concepts-- it simply occurs or does not.

I think this is particularly well stated and important. And I also think that it is good that Don continues to respond on this point because if there is any that we need to be as sharp as possible in explaining, it is probably this one. At least from where I sit, that is the best interpretation I have of Don's viewpoint --- we seem to be wrestling over whether it is every proper to generalize that a standard of conduct is so reliably productive of pleasure that it can be generalized into being always virtuous, or whether crossing that line is always going to violate other Epicurean observations about the contextual nature of feeling and nature itself.

That's what I get out of:

[Quote from Don](#)

The reason that those life choices can be cautioned against is that they do not - from observation over time and multiple instances - do not reliably lead to a lifetime of pleasure. Trying to say that they do or can is living in a utopian hypothetical fantasy world.

And that is why Elayne is (in my view) responding properly with:

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I am going to be bold and say that for any specific behavior/virtue you want to name as universally leading to a maximally pleasurable human life, I can name an exception. Virtues depend on pleasure for their very definition-- but feeling is a direct experience and can't be defined away.

Can't be defined away, and can't be predicted with certainty because there is no "necessity" or "fate" involved to require the outcome.

Post by “Cassius” of March 20, 2021 at 10:11 AM

I have to come back to this, and also emphasize I am not directing it at Don:

[Quote from Elayne](#)

In fact, this issue is key to the differences between us and Stoics, and in the difficulties we face in attracting as much interest. ***People resist understanding that nothing defines pleasure other than the direct experience.*** Maximum pleasure is not modified or limited by definitions or concepts-- it simply occurs or does not.

I think this is a HUGE problem. This is where people have their pre-existing virtue systems of their group or even just themselves, and they have an extremely hard time accepting that imposing their system on others cannot be justified philosophically through Epicurus or anyone else, and certainly not through religion.

This is the aspect that I think makes Epicurus so revolutionary. The upheavals brought about by Karl Marx would eventually pale in comparison to the widespread adoption of fundamental Epicurean philosophy. And there are deeply entrenched institutions throughout almost every aspect of society and every corner of the modern world that are going to do everything they possibly can to make sure (from their point of view) that such a revolution never takes place.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2021 at 3:02 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

In PD5, Epicurus does not idealize the words prudently, morally, and justly. He doesn't put forth a concept of prudence that would result in the same action for every human in every situation.

I never said he idealized those "virtues" as capital-V Virtues.

In fact, that's exactly why he did **NOT** write:

Quote

It is not possible to live a pleasurable life without Wisdom, Morality, and Justice; and it is impossible to live with Wisdom, Morality, and Justice without living pleurably. When one of these is lacking, it is impossible to live a pleasurable life.

as if they were Platonic ideals or absolutes. He used adverbs to clearly show he was not talking about specific actions but rather acting *prudently, morally, and justly* in any given situation.

Post by "Elayne" of March 20, 2021 at 3:29 PM

[Don](#) which means morality itself depends on the pleasure of the specific perceiver, since it isn't ideal. Yet you argued above that there are behaviors that will consistently and verifiably lead to a pleasurable life for "any organism." That isn't true.

The strongest true statement is that there are behaviors which are highly likely to lead to a pleasurable life for most typical members of a species. Those things are useful to know as a starting place, but for maximum life pleasure, an individual must learn if and how they are atypical-- and 100% typical humans are, in my experience, nonexistent. In medicine, every person I've met has at least one feature that is not within 2 std deviations on a Bell curve. It would be surprising if that weren't the case considering the huge number of features we have. It's why docs should be very careful about ordering unnecessary tests, because every extra lab we get increases the chance of finding a meaningless out of range result.

Why wouldn't we expect the same to be true of pleasure, and thus of virtue?

When you said honesty wasn't the most important virtue in my hypothetical but protecting the friend was, that is exactly the kind of thing virtue ethicists say-- while failing to acknowledge that the actual deciding factor is pleasure, not protection of another.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2021 at 4:01 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

When you said honesty wasn't the most important virtue in my hypothetical but protecting the friend was, that is exactly the kind of thing virtue ethicists say-- while failing to acknowledge that the actual deciding factor is pleasure, not protection of another.

Let me rephrase then: The pain I would feel if my friend were harmed is actually the deciding factor.

Post by “Cassius” of March 20, 2021 at 4:25 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

The strongest true statement is that there are behaviors which are highly likely to lead to a pleasurable life for most typical members of a species. Those things are useful to know as a starting place, but for maximum life pleasure, an individual must learn if and how they are atypical-- and 100% typical humans are, in my experience, nonexistent.

I agree but I'll also offer that I think Elayne is reacting to the argument here, and i think we would probably all agree that "those things" aren't really just a starting place, but probably take is quite a way toward the goal in most instances -- but they won't all the time, and it's the exceptions that prove the rule -- and the rule is that while we can make make general conclusions which high degrees of confidence in many instances, we have to always be looking to be sure that we aren't in a situation where the facts are different from prior situations so as to cause a very different result.

In other words I don't think any of us have a problem with saying that "in general" we can use the past to point the right direction in the future, but we certainly can't do that all the time, and we have to understand that the universe isn't mechanistic or determined or fated or guided by divinity and so walk and chew gum at the same time.

Post by “Elayne” of March 20, 2021 at 5:02 PM

[Cassius](#) yes, I agree that it's an important starting place. It's the same in medicine-- there's almost no treatment that works for 100% of patients. But we obviously want to start with the thing having the highest success rate for most people! And move on to something else if it doesn't work.

I am arguing that the exceptions don't prove the rule so much as they demonstrate the scope of the rule, including its limits. Part of that is because of the current discussion ... and part of it is because I am myself highly atypical in several areas. Without understanding my atypical characteristics, I would be looking for pleasure in the wrong places.

Post by “Don” of March 20, 2021 at 11:39 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I am going to be bold and say that for any specific behavior/virtue you want to name as universally leading to a maximally pleasurable human life, I can name an exception.

Whether you can name an exception to an action in a specific circumstance doesn't really prove anything. Acting justly, prudently, and morally *is* contextual. It may be that the same action in a different situation would not be acting prudently, justly, or morally.

Maybe I should say that in a specific situation, there are actions within that given scenario that would lead to a more pleasurable life for (almost) anyone. The identical action in a different situation may not lead to a more pleasurable life. Therefore, there are no absolute or uniquely virtuous actions; only virtuous actions contextually for a given circumstance.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

People resist understanding that nothing defines pleasure other than the direct experience. Maximum pleasure is not modified or limited by definitions or concepts-- it simply occurs or does not.

There's nothing to argue about here in that pleasure or pain *are* direct experience, just like the senses. Pain and pleasure are two non-rational/pre-cognitive guides we use to make choices and rejections.

How do you define what Epicurus meant by the "limit of pleasure" or the "maximum pleasure"? Can you expand on what you mean by it "simply occurs or does not"? And if it "simply occurs or does not" what use is it to make choices or rejections in an effort to bring the maximally

pleasurable life about?

Post by “Don” of March 21, 2021 at 12:13 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In other words I don't think any of us have a problem with saying that "in general" we can use the past to point the right direction in the future, but we certainly can't do that all the time, and we have to understand that the universe isn't mechanistic or determined or fated or guided by divinity and so walk and chew gum at the same time.

One of the few things we can use to make choices and rejections in the present is whether we reacted with pleasure or pain to a specific action in a specific situation in the past. Is the current situation similar enough to the past situation to warrant one decision or another? Barring that, have we observed others taking actions that had painful or pleasurable outcomes *from our perspective* in similar circumstances to this? We don't have to accept a mechanistic or divine universe to use observation and perceived causes and effects to make prudent decisions.

Post by “Elayne” of March 21, 2021 at 7:58 AM

[Don](#) Adding "almost" anyone to your assertion is fine. Low empathy humans are a small percentage of the population.

I'm on the other end of atypical-- I can't even stand to watch fake violence in movies, lol. So my decisions regarding potential harm to strangers need to take my atypical responses into account. This is more useful than trying to make myself become typical. It's also helpful to my pleasure to remember that the majority of others are likely not being consciously cruel when they do things to each other that make me cringe. Most likely, their empathy settings are more in the center. If I failed to keep this in mind, I would think I was surrounded by psychopaths on all sides.

It's not a virtue of mine, relative to them, that I avoid doing things they do-- it's only a virtue in regards to my own pleasure. They wouldn't be happier changing to be like me, either, so far as I can tell.

As far as the limits of pleasure, maximum pleasure, I think we have discussed this before, and I have not changed my position from what I outlined in my article here [On Pain, Pleasure, and Happiness](#)

What I mean by pleasure occurring or not is that it depends on material causes, not on people's opinions about what ought to happen. Like that quote about facts not caring about someone's opinions. A person may think folks ought not get pleasure from someone else's suffering, but that has no bearing on whether or not such a thing happens in real life. For instance, my opinion does not affect the reality of schadenfreude, a "normal" phenomenon I don't experience.

Maximum pleasure is exactly what an ordinary person would say it is-- total filling of one's mind and body with wonderful bliss-- and it occurs when all pain is absent. When one has achieved maximum blissfulness, it's unmistakable. One will not want anything more at that time, as Epicurus noted. Contrary to rumor, regular humans can experience this.

The maximum possible pleasure over a lifetime is realistically not likely going to involve continuous total bliss, because we don't have the power to prevent every pain, including pains that can stand in the path to pleasures--- but we can obtain a lot more ongoing pleasure than most people realize. And to do so requires dropping Stoicism and usual virtue ethics completely! We must evaluate all decisions and virtues in light of pleasure as our sole guide and goal. Yes, of course, it's smart to take into account both our past experiences and the experiences of other humans in similar situations. That's basic physics.

Post by “Cassius” of March 21, 2021 at 8:59 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I'm on the other end of atypical-- I can't even stand to watch fake violence in movies, lol. So my decisions regarding potential harm to strangers need to take my atypical responses into account.

In other words, Elayne is much better suited constitutionally to being a doctor rather than an infantry captain! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 21, 2021 at 9:30 AM

And I am constitutionally unable to run a "Meat-producing" plant like with chickens, hogs, etc. I am no vegan myself, but if it were left up to me no one would have any animal-product food available again 😊

Post by "Don" of March 21, 2021 at 10:42 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

It's not a virtue of mine, relative to them, that I avoid doing things they do-- it's only a virtue in regards to my own pleasure. They wouldn't be happier changing to be like me, either, so far as I can tell.

Ah, that's my point. Someone observing your behavior may attribute it to your "virtue." You know that's an erroneous interpretation, but you're not responsible for correcting their mistaken opinion. [Unless you want to engage in some Epicurean evangelism, of course. That's up to you.] You know you're doing it because it brings you pleasure.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I have not changed my position from what I outlined in my article

Thanks for the link. I'll take a look at that.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

What I mean by pleasure occurring or not is that it depends on material causes, not on people's opinions about what ought to happen.

Okay, I have no problem with this then. Your previous phrasing read to me like you were advocating some kind of *sui generis* arising. I interpreted it to mean you were implying something different. As long as we're clear the work needs to be done and choices and rejections need to be made to bring it about, we're in agreement.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Maximum pleasure is exactly what an ordinary person would say it is-- total filling of one's mind and body with wonderful bliss-- and it occurs when all pain is absent. When one has achieved maximum blissfulness, it's unmistakable. One will not want anything

more at that time, as Epicurus noted. Contrary to rumor, regular humans can experience this.



[Quote from Elayne](#)

The maximum possible pleasure over a lifetime is realistically not likely going to involve continuous total bliss, because we don't have the power to prevent every pain, including pains that can stand in the path to pleasures--- but we can obtain a lot more ongoing pleasure than most people realize.



[Quote from Elayne](#)

We must evaluate all decisions and virtues in light of pleasure as our sole guide and goal. Yes, of course, it's smart to take into account both our past experiences and the experiences of other humans in similar situations. That's basic physics.

Yep, I agree with this statement, too.

So.... Do we disagree somewhere then that I'm missing? Is there anything I've stated that you take issue with? Or that I've implied that you don't agree with? I'm sincere and not being mean, sarcastic, or flippant here. I'm genuinely curious to dig into details.

Post by “Elayne” of March 21, 2021 at 11:27 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

"Epicurus clearly tried to break sharply away from "virtue for virtue's sake." Virtue, he taught, was instrumental to pleasure and thus to leading a pleasurable life. So, it seems to me that Epicureans are still going to act virtuously to the outside observer. The inner motivation is going to be far different than the Stoic or Aristotelian, but the visible form/action is going to be similar."

and **very importantly**, you said:

"People who take pleasure in what the average human would find morally or ethically repugnant aren't living according to Epicurean principles and so we would have reason to intervene and attempt to get them to change. Just because they are feeling pleasure doesn't make their life choice-worthy. I wrestle with this, but the more I think about it, the more I'm coming to these conclusions."

Don I initially entered this conversation replying to Joshua, and you made these assertions above in your first response to me. Later, you also said there were actions that would lead to pleasurable lives for "any" organism, I disagreed, and you modified your statement to apply to "almost all"-- and that I agreed with.

For the first quote above, I would make that same adjustment-- that "almost all" Epicureans are still going to act in ways that most outside observers would label as virtuous.

And for the second paragraph, I think you are incorrect. If these people are truly taking pleasure in what most others would find repugnant (and when I say this, please be assured that I am always referring to the overall pleasure/pain consequences of decisions, not only the immediate ones), then they are living according to Epicurean principles if they make these choices. Our reason to intervene is on our own behalf. And if as a group we contribute consequences to their actions which then change their pain/pleasure outcomes, they may be wise to change their decision. However in some cases, their pleasure will outweigh any painful consequence others can devise, in the same way that I doubt any amount of torture could cause me to betray one of my children. Their lives can be choice-worthy to them and not to others.

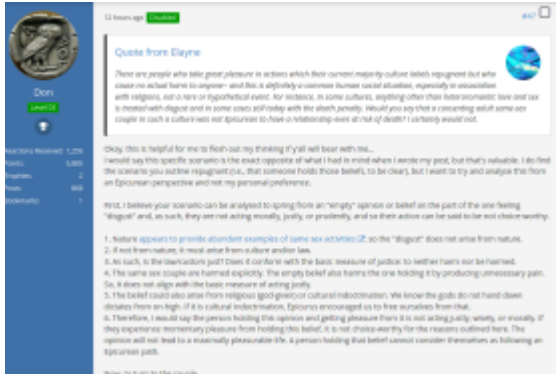
Here I am not only speaking about psychopaths. There are people who take great pleasure in actions which their current majority culture labels repugnant but who cause no actual harm to anyone-- and this is definitely a common human social situation, especially in association with religions, not a rare or hypothetical event. For instance, in some cultures, anything other than heteroromantic love and sex is treated with disgust and in some cases still today with the death penalty. Would you say that a consenting adult same-sex couple in such a culture was not Epicurean to have a relationship even at risk of death? I certainly would not.

A majority reaction of repugnance is not a ruler to measure individual pleasure or Epicurean wisdom.

That second comment was what initiated my whole train of objections. If you no longer agree with what you said, then we have no disagreement!

Post by "Cassius" of March 22, 2021 at 9:19 AM

ADMIN NOTE: At this point in the conversation, Don wrote a post which launches a discussion more oriented toward "justice" than the original point of this thread. Here is a screen-clip of the post and you can find it and the ensuing discussion [here](#). Please pursue the "justice" discussion [there](#), and pursue the main point of this thread continue here.



Post by “Matteng” of December 13, 2021 at 6:09 PM

Hi,

I come from the stoic camp and cross over not as an scout but as an deserter 😊 (based on a Seneca quote)

I think these are the main points for the popularity:

- There is a divine rest in nature (like in the deep respect of Einstein (see Einsteins God, natural forces/laws, string theory, M theory)
- Success of modern Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Rationality science friendly
- Social, Connection of all humans, nature, political responsibility

But I think 1. all these aspects are even in Epicurean philosophy but more realistic/naturalistic/scientific.

For example

- a deep respect for nature but without divinity/God/fate/plan;

- taking reason to question thoughts/actions/judgments and using psychologic techniques when useful for pleasure etc. not everything is an opinion (like in CBT);

- Rational (+ importance of empirism/sense data) and social (friendly, justice is important, but not metaphysical, so more realistic)

And 2. It is so good that Epicurus binds pleasure and virtue together, with pleasure as the end:

Example:

Say there is a competition between a Stoic and Epicurean in staying out in the cold in winter.

Why does the Stoic this ? -> For the sake of virtue (courage, moderation)

Why does the Epicurean do this ? -> Maybe for better health, sustain pleasure and choose a little pain for it.

So let´s say after 2 hours a medical practitioner would come and says, that a longer stay would risk your health, you should stop that.

=> The Epicurean uses his prudence/wisdom to choose that it´s enough for the pleasure of health and stops it.

=> The Stoic: Health ? It´s a preferred indifferent, to train virtue like (courage/endurance/moderation) is the highest value (Stoic wisdom). But when to stop ?

Only when virtue can´t be trained any further, maybe by fainting, loosing consciousness ?

Or dying because of freezing ? But ok life/death is even an indifferent..... Virtue is the highest goal.

So the Stoic would be irrational ?

Stoic: "But not so fast : Even the Epicurean has to use prudence/wisdom/virtue for his decision to stop because it is in complete control, pain / pleasure / health are not... And pain will not say you when it is enough freezing, so why concentrate on any other in life as virtue ?."

Epicurean: "Yes, but my prudence values life/pleasure/health as goods, not virtue, because virtue as an instrument has no limit to calculate on, it is never enough it is abstract. I have trained endurance, the virtues and my health, you can loose everything if you freeze to death for virtue, on pleasure/pain and related goods you can calculate your optimum and limits".

= > So to live pleasantly you need to live virtuously and vice versa.

What to you think ? Have I understand it right ?

Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2021 at 8:13 PM

I think you're on the right track and even before that -- welcome to active posting after lurking for quite a while! 😊

As I scan through your comments I think all of them are correct. It occurs to me to say that my experience is that there are very "practical" people for whom your observations are pretty much all they ever need to see. Given those observations, which are correct, they then go back to focusing on the practical side of life, where they are most comfortable, and that's all they need to know or care about. That's fine.

But there are others who really "get into" the logical arguments that divide the two schools, and those people don't find it satisfying to stop at the observation that "the virtues" and "pleasure" go hand in hand. And it's also my experience that many of those people who don't want to stop there are some of the most devoted Stoics, because they are focused on the "epistemological" issues, even maybe more so than the physics issues.

Maybe to better explain the point I am thinking about I would suggest you read sometime (if you haven't) the latter books of Cicero's *ON ENDS* where he attacks Stoicism from his own more standard "Academic" perspective. His attack is really vigorous and I think makes a lot of sense even from (or especially from) a non-Epicurean perspective, and Cicero probably helps draw into the open why people should be dissatisfied with Stoicism.

So my answer to your question is "yes I think you understand it right as far as you have gone so far." And the question of whether you want to go further to focus on the more abstract issues is entirely up to you and what makes you happy - since from our Epicurean perspective your goal is in fact happiness based on pleasure, rather than as the Stoics might say, "knowledge for the sake of knowledge." For some people it takes plowing into the more abstract issues, for others it doesn't.

Post by “Eggplant Wizard” of January 10, 2024 at 4:30 PM

Setting aside Hegel's own peculiar terminology (world-spirit, Notion, etc- I'm not here to promote or defend Hegel's philosophy) I find Hegel's summary of Stoicism, in *Phenomenology*

of the Spirit, to give a pretty good insight into its allurements and its ultimate flaw, ie its sterility.

...whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence, its aim is to be free, and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence, alike from being active as passive, into the simple essentiality of thought. Self-will is the freedom which entrenches itself in some particularity and is still in bondage, while Stoicism is the freedom which always comes directly out of bondage and returns into the pure universality of thought. As a universal form of the World~Spirit Stoicism could only appear on the scene in a time of universal fear and bondage but also a time of universal culture which had raised itself to the level of thought.

The freedom of self-consciousness is indifferent to natural existence and has therefore let this equally go free: the reflection is a twofold one. Freedom in thought has only pure thought as its truth, a truth lacking the fullness of life. Hence freedom in thought, too, is only the Notion of freedom, not the living reality of freedom itself. For the essence of that freedom is at first only thinking in general, the form as such [of thought] , which has turned away from the independence of things and returned into itself. But since individuality in its activity should show itself to be alive, or in its thinking should grasp the living world as a system of thought, there would have to be present in thought itself a content for that individuality, in the one case a content of what is good, and in the other of what is true, in order that what is an object for consciousness should contain no other ingredient whatever except the Notion which is the essence. But here the Notion as an abstraction cuts itself off from the multiplicity of things, and thus has no content in its own self but one that is given to it. Consciousness does indeed destroy the content as an alien immediacy [Sein] when it thinks it; but the Notion is a determinate Notion, and this determinateness of the Notion is the alien element which it has within it. Stoicism, therefore, was perplexed when it was asked for what was called a 'criterion of truth as such', Le. strictly speaking, for a content of thought itself. To the question, What is good and true, it again gave for answer the contentless thought: The True and the Good shall consist in reasonableness. But this self-identity of thought is again only the pure form in which nothing is determined. The True and the Good, wisdom and virtue, the general terms beyond which Stoicism cannot get, are therefore in a general way no doubt uplifting, but since they cannot in fact produce any expansion of the content, they soon become tedious.

I also think Hegel's note on the historical context of Stoicism is relevant to explaining its relative popularity today- a time of universal fear and bondage. A general feeling of isolation, alienation, and powerlessness can be addressed a number of ways; what Stoicism offers is a kind of deliberately induced dissociation. And as others have noted, the Stoic asceticism does seem well-attuned to the present social orthodoxy, where work, family, fitness, "the grind" etc

are exalted at the expense of pleasure.

The Epicureans offered, among other things, a community. They were not monks withdrawn from society but they did offer a certain breathing space free of society's pressures. The practical difficulties of establishing and maintaining such a community today are no doubt enormous. I understand that Philodemus wrote some guidelines for running a Garden, I'll have to see what he has to say.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2024 at 4:40 PM

I don't recall seeing that from Hegel previously -- thanks for posting!

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 11, 2024 at 12:50 PM

This discussion inspired a few memes ...





