

In Our Time: Epicureanism (BBC)

Post by "Paquin" of July 22, 2021 at 2:45 AM

Epicureanism

[In Our Time](#)

Angie Hobbs, David Sedley and James Warren join Melvyn Bragg to discuss Epicureanism, the system of philosophy based on the teachings of Epicurus and founded in Athens in the fourth century BC. Epicurus outlined a comprehensive philosophical system based on the idea that everything in the Universe is constructed from two phenomena: atoms and void. At the centre of his philosophy is the idea that the goal of human life is pleasure, by which he meant not luxury but the avoidance of pain. His followers were suspicious of marriage and politics but placed great emphasis on friendship. Epicureanism became influential in the Roman world, particularly through Lucretius's great poem *De Rerum Natura*, which was rediscovered and widely admired in the Renaissance.

With:

Angie Hobbs

Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield

David Sedley

Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge

James Warren

Reader in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge

Producer: Thomas Morris.

Post by "Paquin" of July 22, 2021 at 2:50 AM

Sorry, forgot to link to the actual episode. Here it is:

[In Our Time: Epicureanism](#)

Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2021 at 5:23 AM

It's been a while but I recall too that being a useful episode. You'll find lots of praise here on the forum for David Sedley but more mixed reviews for James Warren, because it's usually through Warren or several others of the same disposition (edit- Tim O'Keefe comes to mind too) that perspectives like this following one get emphasized:

[Quote from Quote](#)

At the centre of his philosophy is the idea that the goal of human life is pleasure, by which he meant not luxury but the avoidance of pain

...which I find to be a misleading and distracting slant of which I do not think Epicurus would approve.

While pleasure is certainly a key issue with Epicurus, In my opinion the issue being referenced about the nature of pleasure is much too subtle to be conveyed in this way to beginning readers. The distinction raised is not "at the center" of the philosophy, and Epicurus did not even campaign against "luxury" in itself, any more than he campaigned for frugality. That's because what he indeed campaigned for is not properly defined as "absence" but instead the "presence" of the feeling of pleasure in a way that everyone can immediately grasp through feeling rather than intellectually.

In fact this issue is fascinating and in my view probably describes how the school fractured in the centuries after Epicurus, as later self-styled Epicureans deviated from Epicurus himself, who saw the issue as critical. This is well captured here by Torquatus from On Ends, who himself (through Cicero, probably) seems to have embraced the "heresy":

(This first part is likely absolutely correct):

"Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

(Now here comes the heresy:)

"Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain."

To conclude, whether you agree with what I am assertion at this stage or not, it will pay to keep alert to the implications of this issue and to be aware that not everything you read about Epicurus, even by those who appear to be in Epicurus' side, can be accepted at face value.

Post by "Paquin" of July 22, 2021 at 7:13 AM

Thank you for sharing your views on the episode. I am also working my way through the doctrine and am on PD3

PD3 The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.

This phrase 'the removal of all that is painful' does seem to suggest to me a more tranquil state of affairs than violent delight, so to speak, but I am not focusing on this at the moment. And I appreciate the guidance in the form of helping me see the bigger picture.

I was thinking I was supposed to post a kind of review of the podcast, which was rather daunting. I'm glad you have done it instead.

Post by "Cassius" of July 22, 2021 at 7:56 AM

Ha it would be great to hear YOUR review of the podcast too! 😊

Also, from the biography of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius:

Quote

Epicurus differs from the Cyrenaics about pleasure. For they do not admit static pleasure, but only that which consists in motion. But Epicurus admits both kinds both in the soul and in the body, as he says in the work on Choice and Avoidance and in the book on The Ends of Life and in the first book On Lives and in the letter to his friends in Mytilene. Similarly, Diogenes in the 17th book of Miscellanies and Metrodorus in the Timocrates speak thus: 'Pleasure can be thought of both as consisting in motion and as static.' And Epicurus in the work on Choice speaks as follows: 'Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures, but joy and exultation are considered as active pleasures involving motion. '

The most succinct and authoritative analysis I have seen of this is the [Boris Nikolsky article "Epicurus on Pleasure"](#)

Also:

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, III.18.41: Why do we shirk the question, Epicurus, and why do we not confess that we mean by pleasure what you habitually say it is, when you have thrown off all sense of shame? Are these your words or not? For instance, in that book which embraces all your teaching (for I shall now play the part of translator, so no one may think I am inventing) you say this: "For my part I find no meaning which I can attach to what is termed good, if I take away from it the pleasures obtained by taste, if I take away the pleasures which come from listening to music, if I take away too the charm derived by the eyes from the sight of figures in movement, or other pleasures by any of the senses in the whole man. Nor indeed is it possible to make such a statement as this - that it is joy of the mind which is alone to be reckoned as a good; for I understand by a mind in a state of joy, that it is so, when it has the hope of all the pleasures I have named - that is to say the hope that nature will be free to enjoy them without any blending of pain." And this much he says in the words I have quoted, so that anyone you please may realize what Epicurus understands by pleasure.

Post by "Godfrey" of July 22, 2021 at 5:55 PM

Regarding PD3, there are also these two threads:

Thread

[Practical exercises: PD3](#)

[...]

Exercise: as you go about your day, focus on pleasurable sensations, thoughts, feelings and actions and, later, think about what happened to your mental and physical pains while you were focused on pleasure.

Notes: Think about the difficulty of removing all pains, especially as you get older and physical pains increase! The mere act of focusing on pains increases them. Instead, focusing on pleasure can be a therapeutic practice when you are in times of pain and stress. Further, the choice...



Godfrey

July 8, 2021 at 1:34 AM

Thread

[Practical exercises: PD4](#)

[...]

Exercise: focus on pleasurable sensations, thoughts, feelings and actions and, later, think about what happened to your mental and physical pains.

Notes: Quote from @Don from ([RE: Practical exercises: PD2](#)) “I sometimes have a hard time accepting PD4. Theoretically, yes. Practically? I reach for Tylenol when I have a headache! A chronic, painful condition? That's going to be hard... But maybe PD4 gives us a goal?”

For me, PD4 becomes clearer when not separated from PD3. In this...



Godfrey

July 13, 2021 at 8:06 PM

I think it's helpful to study PD3 and PD4 together, also exploring the practical ramifications, as a further aid to understanding the Canonic faculty of pleasure and pain.

Post by “Paquin” of July 25, 2021 at 12:53 PM

Thank you. I like the suggestion of practical exercises to combine these two principal doctrine. I already do something similar, but this intensifies the process. Should be interesting.

Post by “Don” of July 25, 2021 at 1:47 PM

And as we've mentioned before, the sequential numbering of the [Principal Doctrines](#) is a (relatively) modern convention. The early manuscripts just present the doctrines as a continuous text.