

An Exchange on Dealing With Anxiety

Post by "Cassius" of January 7, 2018 at 7:22 AM

Brett Wheat shared his first post.

Hi all

I've been thinking about philosophy as therapy and reflecting on how easily I can use Stoicism to overcome mental anxiety (what I can control, what I can't, etc.).

Let's say you are under a significant amount of pressure to perform well at work. What sort of process do you utilize to analyze and mitigate the stress using Epicureanism?

Thanks,

Brett

AlexR: Overcoming anxiety?

And by anxiety we mean:

1. Fear of the consequences of anticipated future events and occurrences on our life, health and happiness?
2. Fear of a future we will not be able to avoid?
3. Fear that our visions and dreams of our future are prophetic and/or destined?
4. Fear that our future performance may be very different from our successful past?
5. Fear that the future misfortune will exhaust the resources/friendships we have prudently saved away and maintained?
6. Fear that our employer may decide to break the agreed upon contract?
7. Fear that perfect justice may arrive to cash in our past lack of: friendship prudence, honesty, and fairness?
8. Fear that we won't be able to find another way to satisfy our natural and necessary desires and enjoy life, if we fail?
9. Fear of what we may suffer while we are dead?
10. Fear that the task requested, to be performed, is not realizable?

11. ???

If I'm the right track then Epicurus' three letters and his PDs and VSs combined with Torquatus' Defense and Diogenes' Inscription are full of good advice, that we can spell out in comments below.

Brett Wheat 6 and 10 mostly. Thanks Alexander.

Nathan Bartman

"[I]f men do not set bounds to their terror, they endure as much or even more intense anxiety than the man whose views on these matters are quite vague. But mental tranquillity means being released from all these troubles and cherishing a continual remembrance of the highest and most important truths. Hence we must attend to present feelings and sense perceptions [...] For by studying them we shall rightly trace to its cause and banish the source of disturbance and dread" (Letter To Herodotus).

Brett Wheat

Thanks Nathan. I guess I'm looking for the simple strategies that folks use to deal with stress and anxieties. I know that food and clothing is a necessary and natural good. Having a good job seems to help procure those things. When things at work are overwhelming, how can I manage the feeling of being overwhelmed? With stoicism I might parse out what I can control, what I can't, and then resign myself to the fate of what happens. Etc. I'm really fascinated by Epicureanism I think I'm just trying to wrap my head around how to manage my every day issues with the philosophy. Thanks for the advice

Alexander Rios:

Epicureans:

1. enumerate the details and constraints (limits) of our desires/goals and our anticipations of success
2. enumerate our anticipations of how we may fail
3. plan and schedule to succeed

4. proceed through the plan's steps, with actions/interactions, while observing the incoming evidence of our progress

5. adjust our plan, pace, desires and anticipations according to how "on track" we feel, and how successful we've been in the past too.

The steps/actions of the plan can be analogical to others we have encountered in the past, or have seen others use.

This is also known as "navigating life" (or sailing a ship on rough waters).

Practical. Prudent.

Imagine there is a maze of forest and obstacles between you and your final desired destination, and you will find yourself doing all of the above.

Brett Wheat

Ahh. That makes a lot of sense Alexander. I'll need to ponder that but thank you

Could you talk a little more about "limits of desires"? I'm not 100 on what that means?

Alexander Rios

The constraints (limits, boundaries) on your work assignment (goal), that you desire to complete/achieve.

Brett Wheat

Got it! Things that constrain our desires/goals. Thank you

Cassius Amicus

Here are my thoughts, especially now that Brett has clarified his question by pointing to Alex's 6 and 10, and his comments in response to Nathan:

Items 6 and 10 are not facts of nature like death, or the non-existence of supernatural gods, or the existence of pleasure and pain. Whether you will be fired from your job, and whether your assignment is realizable, are mostly controlled by the individual circumstances, choices, and avoidances that each individual has made up to the point of raising this question. Yes, death might intervene, so there are natural limits, but mostly these are questions for the individuals in those circumstances to weigh and balance and act accordingly. That is where references

Brett has made in the rest of the question about "resign myself to the fate of what happens" indicates a Stoic mindset that I believe to be deadly to proper resolution of ANY questions. There is NO "Fate" in the sense implied, and using as a reference "what you can control" and "what you can't" is a useless word game of ambiguity. Can you control the weather? Maybe not, but you can go inside if it is raining. Can you control your employer/company? Maybe not, but you can quit. Can you control that you have to pay rent? Maybe not, but you can move to a cheaper apartment. All of these can be debated endlessly "That's not reasonable for me!!" and that entire analysis is a dead end.

The only proper analysis is that pointed to by Epicurus: What will happen to me if I make this choice? Will it lead to pleasurable or painful living? Sure there are drugs and mental techniques (meditation, incense, whatever you choose) that can be used to strengthen or focus the mind, just like exercise of the body. But if a person is confused as to the meaning of life and thinking that fate controls him or her, then they are hopelessly off base at the start and mind-control techniques just ensure that the confusion is locked in.

Bret I don't mean this to come across as harsh, but rather the point out that unlike modern stoicism, Epicurean philosophy is not a bandaid or anesthesia, but a call to everyone to wake up to the truth about their circumstances and their true goals in life, and to act accordingly and within their power.

Cassius Amicus

As to limits of desires that is a perfect question for the [PD21](#) that I was just rereading: "21. He who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want and makes the whole of life complete is easy to obtain, so that there is no need of actions which involve competition."

The limits of life include the fact that we die and do not live again; that there are no gods to protect us or punish us or tell us what to do, and that pleasure and pain are the only guides given us by nature to decide what to choose and what to avoid. I would suggest to you that rather than being mysterious by the phrase "that which removes the pain due to want and makes the whole of life complete" is really nothing more than a stand-in for the word "pleasure." I suggest that this phrase is used in part because it is impossible to enumerate all the individual types of pleasure which can compose a full life: in other words there is no single class or category of pleasures which alone make a life complete. One can be an astronaut and fly to the moon and have a complete life, or one can be a dirt farmer and raise a family and live close to the land, enjoying it completely, and equally live a full life. Filling our life with pleasures does not require gold and riches -- they are fine if they can be obtained easily, but most people do not live under those circumstances, and they find that living "simply" and valuing those things which are close at hand produce a full life without the need of fighting ('competition') that outweighs the value of what is gained.

Brett Wheat

You have not come across harsh at all. I need to digest this all a bit and I'll come back with a fuller response and probably more questions...

Thank you sincerely for the time it took to reply and the thought you put into your response

Brendan Engen

I'm a psychologist and have found that Epicurean atomistic materialism can, for certain individuals, be a good cognitive remedy for OCD-related contamination phobias.

Cassius Amicus

Thank you for that comment Brendan. While you are directing it to OCD-related contamination phobias, it strikes me that in a very real sense the implications of this analogy go far beyond phobias and extend to the heart of *many* of the issues that Epicurus was attempting to address.

Alexander Rios So yeah. Interesting. The standard model of physics is 16 kinds of interacting particles in motion through space and time. So we and everything are made of, and interact via the same stuff. And some OCD people are relieved of unhealthy fears because of that. Interesting.

Brett Wheat

I feel like I'm rediscovering Epicureanism for the first time with this thread. I think I've never really understood the application of the principles. It's all very exciting. I'm still digesting the application to my specific circumstances but it's very promising. I really value the conversation and am sure Epicurus would be proud of it.

Cassius Amicus

Brett in my view the biggest challenge that modern Epicureans have is throwing off the misconceptions that predominate in most of what has been written about Epicurus in the last 100 years (and much before). If you have not gotten the Norman Dewitt book I highly recommend it.

Brett Wheat Thanks Cassius. I've added to my list

Cassius Amicus

Brett I can't remember how "into" this you are, but in case you are into this as a teacher of some kind, it comes to mind to say that after DeWitt, there is a lot to be learned from Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks on Pleasure." This traces the history of the arguments about Pleasure in ancient Greece, and helps put Epicurus' arguments in perspective, especially as to the "Limits" question you asked. There were very important but technical reasons why "limits" were an issue in Epicurus' time, and IMO it's not possible to appreciate Epicurus' arguments without understanding why the issue of limits is important. People tend to infer that when Epicurus referred to limits he was only saying "live simply" but we know from texts such as [VS63](#) (There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance) that this was not the case.

Plato and others had argued that pleasure cannot be the goal of life because pleasure has no limit, and therefore from a logical argument perspective we can always improve pleasure by adding more things to it. Thus pleasure itself is not the goal of life and we must look to something else.) To defeat that logical argument, it is useful to point out that pleasure in life DOES have a limit - the "full cup" analogy where the life is filled with pleasure, and all pain has been driven out. The limit of pleasure is set by a lifetime - no one can experience more pleasure than his/her definite lifespan. Pointing out that a full lifetime of pleasure is the most than any living being can hope to achieve shows us that there is a "limit of pleasure" which can serve as our concrete goal of life. This fits hand and glove with the context that there are no supernatural gods to direct our lives, and no expectation of life after death in which we might have other considerations higher than how to live *this* life.

These limits arguments may strike some as unnecessarily academic and egg-headed, but the philosophical arguments against pleasure as the goal of life were well developed and well known in Epicurus' world. He had to meet and defeat them, so it should be no surprise that after he disposed of the gods in PD1 and death in PD2, he disposed of the major argument against pleasure as the goal of life in PD3 and in the other doctrines that discuss limits.

(Clarification: Gosling & Taylor only AFTER DeWitt. DeWitt is the key to seeing the forest instead of the trees.)

Post by "brett" of January 8, 2018 at 6:55 AM

THANK YOU for doing this. This exchange was very helpful to me (I'm Brett Wheat btw)

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2018 at 7:01 AM

Yes Brett, your picture makes it easy to recognize you! 😊 And you are welcome - it takes effort but it is fun!