

An Exchange On The Issue of How Much Pain To Accept

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2018 at 7:11 PM


A suggestion for the list of reasons to study Epicurus:


That happiness is not obtained by accumulating wealth, power and fame, beyond what we need for self preservation and helping our friends. Limiting our desires is key to the philosophy. This goes against everything our consumeristic societies tell us to do.[1](#)

Cassius AmicusGroup Admin Thanks Aurelius. For those who have not seen us debate this before, I would say that the formulation ****beyond what we need for self preservation and helping our friends**** needs work to make it more accurate, but in general I agree with you that Epicurus has important things to say on this issue. Everyone can fine-tune their own list but as number 12 for this purpose I have added:

(12) Epicurus will teach you that happiness is not generally obtained by pursuing goals of wealth, power, fame, or material possessions, and that it is necessary to understand our limitations and adjust our desires accordingly.[1](#)

Aurelius Espinoza I purposely mentioned self preservation and friendship. Friendship is absolutely key for our philosophy, and Epicurus has often been accused of being an egoist when the opposite is true. I added "self preservation" because an Epicurean must learn to be content with the bare minimum in case he has no access to luxury. That is not to say that luxury must be rejected in all circumstances, just that he must be psychologically prepared for crisis situations.[1](#)

Cassius AmicusGroup Admin "an Epicurean must learn to be content with the bare minimum in case he has no access to luxury" Just curious, are you a "survivalist"?  type unknown

Aurelius Espinoza Not even close  [1](#) type unknown

Aurelius Espinoza I mean that if I'm short on money, I'll be content with going out less to restaurants and movies. If I can't afford a big house, I'll be content with a small studio, etc[1](#)

[Aurelius Espinoza](#) If I happen to come across a lot of money, than I'd spend it on a trip to Japan and invite a friend or something like that. But if getting that money means I have to do a stressful job that i hate and associate with difficult people, I can do without the money

[Cassius AmicusGroup Admin](#) I absolutely agree with that kind of calculation, and the way you expressed it. So we have no essential difference, I think. But there are at least two errors a lot of people make to warn about in making a general list: (1) some ascetic mentalities who do disagree, and who will never accept [VS63](#) that you can err by being too frugal just like you can err by being too luxurious, and (2) some absolutist mentalities who think there is a "one size fits all" level of living that everyone should seek to achieve in every circumstance.

[Cassius Amicus](#) Ok the second example though is more nuanced. When you say: "If I happen to come across a lot of money, than I'd spend it on a trip to Japan and invite a friend or something like that. But if getting that money means I have to do a stressful job that i hate and associate with difficult people, I can do without the money." Part 1 we fully agree. But part 2 is very difficult to assess. I you have to do that job the rest of your life, I fully agree. But what if you only have to do that job for a week in order to earn the money for the trip to Japan? How long would the trip have to last for it to be worthwhile? I bet a lot of people would properly choose to do the job for a week in exchange for the trip to Japan.

I started to do a separate post on exactly this question so thanks for advancing the ball!

[Cassius AmicusGroup Admin](#) There are some people who argue that ANY additional pain in ANY circumstance is not to be chosen, because our goal is "absence of pain." That formulation has to be unwound in many different ways before it can be properly assessed, but the way most people who would say that mean it, they would be flat wrong (from the Epicurean viewpoint). As the letter to Menoecus says, we sometimes choose pain when greater pleasure is gained that way, so no one should ever think that that could be the Epicurean position. But I think a significant number of people are confused by the "absence of pain" discussion to think that "never accept any pain" is what Epicurus meant.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2018 at 9:13 PM

[Aurelius Espinoza](#) For this specific example, I meant a stressful job for the rest of your life, or at least a big part of it. If it's only 2 weeks, then that's a completely different situation¹

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[Aurelius Espinoza](#) type unknown

[Aurelius Espinoza](#) I overall agree with you though. I think the confusion comes from the fact that Epicurus himself lived an ascetic lifestyle (he lived on bread and water, a bit of cheese was a luxury, etc). My interpretation is that he wanted to prove that it is possible to be happy with little (and in bad health). His disciples, such as Metrodorus, weren't as radical in their practice. I guess what is relevant for modern Epicureans is that one size doesn't fit all, as you say

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[Cassius Amicus](#) type unknown

[Cassius Amicus](#) Now see, I don't believe the comment about cheese and bread should be interpreted that way, even for Epicurus himself. (You wrote: "that Epicurus himself lived an ascetic lifestyle (he lived on bread and water, a bit of cheese was a luxury, etc.)")

There are no flat statements that he ****always**** lived that way. The statement in DL is: "In his correspondence he himself mentions that he was content with plain bread and water. And again: "Send me a little pot of cheese, that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously." Such was the man who laid down that pleasure was the end of life."

Epicurus, you, or me could easily say that we are CONTENT with bread and water while not meaning that we commit to eating it three meals a day. I can say I would be content with bread and water if needed, and mean it, while eating a regular diet.

I think those statements were made for figurative statements for purpose of stating the principle (that he COULD compete with Zeus in that way), but not to be taken as a general rule even for him. There are numerous examples of Epicurus speaking figuratively, such as go to visit his friends "spinning around three times first" (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Philosophers, X.5: Then again to Themista, the wife of Leonteus: "I am quite ready, if you do not come to see me, to spin thrice on my own axis and be propelled to any place that you, including Themista, agree upon.")

And then the flowery wording he used in addressing people in letter:

Plutarch, Against Colotes, 18, p. 1117D: But if, Colotes, you had met with expressions of Socrates' such as Epicurus pens in a letter to Idomeneus: "So send us for the care of our sacred body an offering of first-fruits on behalf of yourself and your children - so I am inspired to put it;" to what more unmannerly terms could you have resorted? {Traditionally, first-fruits were offered to a god - support for Epicurus' bodily needs is so depicted.}

Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, VII p. 279F: It was in fact, for the sake of the belly and the pleasures of the flesh in general that this man flattered Idomeneus and Metrodorus. ... Epicurus, in fact, was the teacher of these men.

Aelius Theon, Preliminary Exercises, 2, I [p. 169 Walz] {II,154 Butts}: ... faulty arrangement, but especially metrical and rhythmical style, like many of the phrases of the orator Hegesias ... as well as some of the phrases of Epicurus, such as where he writes to Idomeneus: "Oh you who have from youth have regarded all my impressions as pleasurable."

Plutarch, Against Colotes, 17, p. 1117B: Colotes himself, for another, while hearing a lecture of Epicurus on natural philosophy, suddenly cast himself down before him and embraced his knees; and this is what Epicurus himself writes about it in a tone of solemn pride: "You, as one revering my remarks on that occasion, were seized with a desire, not accounted for by my lecture, to embrace me by clasping my knees and lay hold of me to the whole extent of the contact that is customarily established in revering and supplicating certain personages. You therefore caused me," he says, "to consecrate you in return and demonstrate my reverence." My word! We can pardon those who say that they would pay any price to see a painting of that scene, one kneeling at the feet of the other and embracing his knees while the other returns the supplication and worship. Yet that act of homage, though skillfully contrived by Colotes, bore no proper fruit: he was not proclaimed a Sage. Epicurus merely says: "Go about as one immortal in my eyes, and think of me as immortal too."

Not to mention that doing anything "with Zeus" would have to be figurative, or else violate Epicurean theology about the way the gods live.

Also, surely devoted Epicureans like Atticus and those at the Villa of the Papyri and most other Epicureans did not live like ascetics, or the philosophy would never have spread. Lucretius was fanatically devoted and gives no hint that he himself ate an ascetic diet.

Else I think it is totally impossible to square with Epicurus' will, which showed him to be well off with numerous slaves. He had at least four slaves, and apparently more than that, as enumerated here: <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...3IRvJWYAxXcjFDQ> And that doesn't include the apparently very significant additional income and property that he doled out to his friends and supporters when he died. It is very unlikely that Epicurus would have had access to so many assets (even luxuries) in other areas of life, but chose to be an ascetic in the category of food.

I don't see any other way to square these statements with the numerous statements Epicurus made endorsing ordinary pleasures, including wine, food, sex, etc., being stuff of the best life. What is clearly true is that he was (as in [VS63](#)) arguing that everyone should choose a sustainable lifestyle so as not to err in either direction of too much or too little luxury, so as to be master over circumstances and be able to live economically/ independently ****if necessary**** for the sake of overall pleasure/avoidance of pain.

But in most cases even in the time of Epicurus, it was possible for many people (like himself) to live normal middle class or higher lifestyles, while not eating an ascetic, without being at the mercy of levels of pain that are not worth the pleasure.

So there is no way I would interpret Epicurus as telling everyone to eat bread and water all the time, and to splurge only on cheese. That's a rhetorical device, even for him. People who eat better than that are not by definition deficient Epicureans.

I think we are moving towards agreeing that in every area, one size does not fit all, and that would have to be a perspective that Epicurus applied even to himself. Eat only beans when necessary, and eat bread and cheese for discipline so you can always be independent, but when circumstances allow eating a normal diet or even higher, then by all means do so if the pleasure of doing so outweighs the pain/expense/effort in doing so.

(This is an important question and comes up often, so I edited several times. Thanks for the opportunity to discuss this.)[Manage](#)

[Epicurus - Last Will](#)

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[Aurelius Espinoza](#) Point taken. There is also historical context: the collapse of Alexander's empire, constant civil wars, the siege of Athens, etc