

Is Epicurean life achievable only for well off?

Post by “waterholic” of September 19, 2022 at 10:12 AM

A few years back I watched a happy-life advice (probably on YouTube) from Bill Gates and Warren Buffett (not my regular passtime, but still...). The essence of it was quite Epicurean: "Try to enjoy life, don't work every hour, spend time with your friends and family". Needless to say, a "don't work too hard" suggestion coming from two gentlemen who jointly have more wealth than GDPs of poorest X countries in the world sounded a bit disingenuous or tone deaf.

Of course, the Epicurean take on this would be: what you really need is not that hard to attain. But Epicurus also places emphasis on being a good friend (and family?) Even if one's own needs are minimal, people surrounding one (children, spouses, relations, friends) do not necessarily subscribe to the idea of not needing iPads and designer clothing. One "spin" would be to say: making people surrounding you happy is the pleasure in life. But if the cost of that is absolute absence of leisure and continuous stress?

How did Epicurus address this issue? Self sufficiency is the recipe of course, which at the time (2300 years ago?) was possible. But even then many did not possess land or means of farming, or freedom! Going back to Epicurus himself, as it transpires, he was certainly a wealthy man (possessed lands and slaves - not a judgement, quite normal for the world before 1800s)!

How do we reconcile this?

Post by “Cassius” of September 19, 2022 at 1:37 PM

My first comment Waterholic is that you are in tune with what I think the majority of us on this forum see as the best interpretation of Epicurus. I'll refer several times to "us" collectively, and I don't want that to be taken too literally, but you should see the same tone written clearly in our documentation setting out the nature and purpose of the website and the views of Epicurus that are behind it.

The call to not live beyond one's means is not a call to asceticism, and I agree completely that working with and assisting our close friends is a significant part of the equation for living happily. I am not as conversant with the details of some of the Philodemus material (on property management) as I would like to be, but what I know about it is consistent with as you describe it "reconciling" the philosophy to the real world.

But I would say that the issue is not really "reconciling" Epicurus with the demands of the real world. I think Epicurus has always been in exactly the right place on these issues, and it is rather the ascetic interpreters of Epicurus who have had him wrong from the beginning.

Once again we're needing to take sides on whether the Romans were "bad Epicureans" (I strongly believe they were NOT bad Epicureans) but you can see in the lifestyles of the known Epicureans of that period that they lived normal and even well-to-do lives when circumstances allowed it. It's not the Romans who misinterpreted Epicurus, it is those who argue that Epicurus said we must only pursue what is absolutely necessary in life.

This has been a theme of many of our recent discussion and also recent episodes of the Lucretius Today podcast. Since you are new to the group I bet you will find reading and listening to some of these recent discussions helpful in showing that "we" are (I think) largely in agreement with you concern. But the concern is not a contradiction in Epicurean philosophy, it's rather in 2000 years of non-Epicurean and anti-Epicurean propaganda. The crowning refutation of which, I think you are perceptive in observing, was Epicurus' own will and the information it gives us about his property at death. Either Epicurus was a supreme hypocrite, preaching minimalism while living large, or SOMEONE is feeding the world the wrong interpretation of Epicurean philosophy. And as you read more on the website it should soon become clear that "we" don't consider Epicurus to have been a supreme hypocrite.

Post by "waterholic" of September 19, 2022 at 1:51 PM

[Cassius](#) thank you, I will consult recent posts and listen to the podcast "to catch up".

Post by "Cassius" of September 19, 2022 at 1:55 PM

Sorry if my message seemed to imply that you need to catch up first -- I just wanted to point out how much attention we pay to the issue because I agree it is very basic.

Part two of my response would be to say that I don't think that there is a single answer that will apply to everyone to the basic question of how much material success to pursue. I think most of us here have real jobs in the real world and/or have some other responsible means of support that allows us to tune our standard of living to something that we find sustainable. I think most of us see that kind of goal as the right target - a standard of living that allows us to pursue what we want to pursue, without tying us down with "golden handcuffs" - a phrase I used in the most

recent podcast.

So there 's a lot more to say but it seemed first and foremost a good idea to respond to the standard perception of the problem - which is that Epicurus was really an ascetic living always on bread and water and essentially spending his life in a cave.

There are indeed some people who advocate that position, but that is not the position you will find that most of us here believe to be accurate to Epicurus or desirable.

Post by “waterholic” of September 19, 2022 at 3:18 PM

No need to apologise, I find a lot of useful ideas reading through everyone's posts.

Indeed, as you say, there has been incredible amount of nonsense circulated about Epicurean position from extreme ascetism to extreme hedonism. Clearly, neither is in the spirit of Epicurus.

My question is: could Epicurean philosophy be of any use to someone in abject poverty and misery as a starting position? After all, much of religion has historically been used to create contentment in misery. Being satisfied with one's own position is all well if the society is just (broadly). Nearly all sources of Epicurean-leaning thought from Buddha (a rich prince who decided to leave the palace and spend some time under a tree) to Bertrand Russell (who argued in favour of idleness while really not needing much gainful employment) happens to originate in the "opulent quarters" of the city.

More practically, partly due to chance and partly due to choice, I am somewhat independent and can have comfortable life without overstressing. How do I suggest to those significantly less fortunate to be satisfied with whatever is within their reach?

Post by “Joshua” of September 19, 2022 at 3:38 PM

Quote

After all, much of religion has historically been used to create contentment in misery.

It's outside the general scope of this forum, but worth noting in passing that this was the essence of Marx's critique of religion in the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of*

Hegel's Philosophy of Right. (And because this is the internet, I now have to clarify that I'm not taking a Marxist possession, but describing one...)

My more specific answer to your question is that it is certainly achievable to derive something worthwhile from Epicureanism for those of little means, though it won't solve their tangible economic problems. I say "something worthwhile" because Epicurus said (and I'm paraphrasing) that unlike other pursuits, which give pleasure only after much difficulty, the study of philosophy gives pleasure and alleviates suffering *while* you're "doing" it, and not exclusively *after* you've "achieved" it.

Post by "Cassius" of September 19, 2022 at 3:42 PM

I don't want to monopolize this conversation so I hope some others will comment soon. Having said that however I want to say:

[Quote from waterholic](#)

How do I suggest to those significantly less fortunate to be satisfied with whatever is within their reach?

I think that is exactly the right wording to say "reach.". The standard way of saying "be satisfied with what you 'have'" does not address those situations where people can and should seek more than they have. That also has been covered in some recent discussions on "desire." Epicurus clearly contemplates some desires for things we do not currently have to be "good" to pursue, so part of the trick is knowing which are reasonable and which are "beyond our reach" (such as immortality) or which will clearly bring more pain to us than pleasure.

We need to grapple more directly with your question in terms of people who are in fact severely disadvantaged, but it's good to get the general picture clear first.

And certainly even those in the worst physical circumstances are not well served by myths about rewards in heaven or ideals with no basis in reality.

Certainly part of the conversation will involve [VS63](#) as a reminder that undershooting ones potential is as much of an error as overshooting, so one step is evaluating what is possible, and other steps will involve the observations from various sources including Lucretius that money does not and cannot buy eternal life or happiness that is essentially higher or different than what is available on a more modest budget.

In the end there are no magic answers, but connecting with reality rather than with dreams seems the most likely way to do our best in dealing with these problems.

Post by “Godfrey” of September 19, 2022 at 4:42 PM

[Cassius](#) has said much of what I've been thinking. I'd just add as a synopsis to what he has written above that Epicurean philosophy meets people where they are, and gives a clear statement of how to live. The confusion comes from the fact that the statement isn't a strict formula, but one that each individual can adapt to their circumstances. (Of course the confusion also comes from the multitude of misrepresentations of the philosophy.)

1. The goal is pleasure. Pleasure is a Feeling, not a destination.
2. Understand desire, and act accordingly. There's nothing wrong with desire! You just have to balance the pursuit of desires with the goal of pleasure. A tool to use for this is the categories of desires: this is a tool for deciding for oneself which of one's desires might be fruitful to pursue, and which ones are likely to divert one from the goal. It's also helpful to think of the goal as the fullness of pleasure when evaluating desires.

Post by “Don” of September 19, 2022 at 11:01 PM

Excellent question, @waterholic and good responses from the rest of the crew. I'd just add (or emphasize) that Epicurus's philosophy encourages people - at any level of socio-economic status - that one can find pleasure in living. If all you have at the moment are the small things, we should all take pleasure in the small things: eating food to nourish the body even if meagre, feeling the sun on one's face, etc.

I think Epicurus would also encourage people to do all they can to satisfy their essential needs. Without those things "necessary for life" and well-being and the health of the body, one will find it very difficult to enjoy pleasure and to be sure of its continuance.

Post by “waterholic” of September 20, 2022 at 1:54 AM

Quote

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[Joshua](#) yes indeed, Marx referred to religion as opium for the people. I tend to treat this issue on two different planes. So far as personal philosophy is concerned, the Epicurean reasoning is the closest to me (no need to worry about gods). Then there is the social justice and economics plane, where organised religion can be a source of social cohesion or a force that holds the society back (or both). On this plane I would have hoped for different tools to achieve social cohesion.

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 20, 2022 at 5:01 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

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More practically, partly due to chance and partly due to choice, I am somewhat independent and can have comfortable life without oversteering. How do I suggest to those significantly less fortunate to be satisfied with whatever is within their reach?

I think that it might be good to consider that happiness depends on a certain level of fulfillment of basic necessities. If you don't have the basics (food, shelter, clothing) then you will have a high level of discomfort in life. Also, you need to know that your basics are going to be covered in the future, or else you will be absorbed in worry. So you need to have a sense of a secure future (there may be a PD on this?). And all of this depends upon the ability to problem solve as to what to do so as to secure one's future. I would guess that possessing the ability to problem solve and then also carry out necessary actions may be dependent on intelligence levels (and also having good mental health).

So then the question: How many people go through life feeling worry about their own financial situation? (and doubt their ability to secure food and shelter in the future). This isn't a problem of just poor people, but also some in the middle class who feel uncertain about their future (if you don't save enough money for retirement or have loans that you need to pay off).

Quite a number of times Maslow's hierarchy of needs has come up on the forum -- and I would say that there is something to that. Once basic needs are met then one can turn to intellectual pursuits and also deal with "spiritual" issues (fear of death, question of life after death, nature of the universe, etc)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am not as conversant with the details of some of the Philodemus material (on property management)

I also still need to study Philodemus. But it almost appears to me that the implications are that many Epicureans were well off (perhaps in a similar manner as the "landed gentry" in England). Managing wealth can be a time consuming endeavor, and I think that is one thing that Philodemus gives advice on. Interestingly, I do wonder if later Epicureans such (as Philodemus) are the ones who developed more therapeutics (beyond dealing with fear of death, etc) and in the aid of removing discontent and increasing happiness.

Post by "Martin" of September 20, 2022 at 6:01 AM

Complementarily to the recommendations for coping with misery by enjoying the small pleasures, we can try to get out of misery. A major tool to reconcile sustained maximal pleasure as the goal with the actually available options is hedonic calculus. (Growing up as a weak and small guy in a working-class suburb with a construction worker who was an alcoholic as the father, I started off at the very opposite of the "opulent quarters" of the city, and so did Steve Jobs. I figured out hedonic calculus by myself and that helped me to get out of the misery.)

A slave in ancient Greece or in the United States in 19th century might have considered the following options:

1. Working hard to fulfill the master's orders to avoid the pain of corporal punishment and to eventually get freed as a reward.
2. Trying to escape to where conditions are better. (E.g. being a slave in Athens might have been better than to be a slave in Sparta; survival in hiding in a faraway wilderness might have been better than slavery under a cruel master, escaping to freedom in the North and possibly

fighting as a Union soldier might have been worth the risk.)

3. Staying a slave because material security was assured under reasonably good circumstances. (E.g. after the rise of Rome and the end of Greek democracy, an educated Greek might have chosen to work as a slave to teach children of a wealthy Roman family.)

An employee in 2022 under miserable conditions might consider the following options:

1. Working hard, saving as much as possible and investing wisely to facilitate early retirement or to start a business.

2. Upgrading of education to qualify for promotion to a better position. (I took the opportunity to get as high an education as possible, which provided opportunities for pleasurable jobs. My sister worked for a bank after high school, quit to take care of her daughter, divorced and worked part time for a public institution, studied remotely for a university degree in her forties and then got the expected promotion to a full-time position which required the degree.)

3. Working for a different company or in a different industry.

Hard work is necessary for quite some years to get out of misery, meet demands of a spouse, provide a good education to the children and get a decent life. However, there is no point in working hard until retirement without much pleasure if then all we can still do is tottering around in an old peoples' home.

Post by “Cassius” of September 20, 2022 at 12:03 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think that it might be good to consider that happiness depends on a certain level of fulfillment of basic necessities. If you don't have the basics (food, shelter, clothing) then you will have a high level of discomfort in life.

This is absolutely correct. Reading it stated in this way, however, reminds me to say things like "What alternative to Epicurean philosophy would be better for someone who doesn't have the basic necessities of life?" Would it be better for a poor person to start praying to supernatural gods? Would it be better for a poor person to start hoping for a better life in heaven after death? Would it be better for a poor person to start believing that there is an ideal statement of what it means to be "a good man" written in the sky somewhere? Or would it be better for a poor person, just like a rich person, to understand that no matter how far they might be from luxury or even the basics at a particular moment, that it is better to understand how the

universe does work, and learn to work within the system of nature, rather than trying to avoid the facts of reality?

I would say that even when he was suffering the most at the end of his life, Epicurus was still providing us the best example of the way to live as an Epicurean in the way he faced his last days.

I think it is important to consider that not every person who is "happy" and surrounded by pleasures is by any means an Epicurean, nor is a poor person in the midst of great distress prevented from being an extremely proficient Epicurean. I hate to draw on the old biblical analogies but it is similar to the verse about how everyone who calls on the name of Christ is not necessarily a Christian. There are many political and religious opportunists who succeed in surrounding themselves by pleasure and avoiding pain, at least for a while, but that does not in any proper sense make them an Epicurean. That's one reason the name of the philosophy is best known as "Epicureanism" and not "hedonism."

So I would say that it's not actual success in pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain that makes one a good Epicurean, but understanding the way the world works and doing our best regardless of our circumstances and regardless of results to pursue life in the right way, consistent with what we believe to be the truth about our place in the universe.

Epicurus was in the middle of intense pain when he died, but that intensity of pain in no way made him less of an Epicurean.

Post by “waterholic” of September 20, 2022 at 1:33 PM

[Kalosyni](#) thank you - love the concept of the ability to problem solve. I suppose having a sober assessment of one's state, an audit of the problems and building an action plan is easier to do with the anxiety left out of the equation. I would suggest that it's the role of Epicurean approach to remove the paralysing anxiety.

[Martin](#) has a great practical approach.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Would it be better for a poor person to start praying to supernatural gods? Would it be better for a poor person to start hoping for a better life in heaven after death? W

Finally [Cassius](#) gave me the remaining piece of the puzzle. My original question was about whether Epicurean life is achievable only for the wealthy. But I think the answer is clear if I separate the **external (social, economic)** from the **internal (our attitude and mode)**.

Epicurean philosophy may or may not be an answer to a social structure (say instead of capitalism, socialism and a bunch of other "isms'). We can't tell because we have not been able to test it. Consequently, the external demand on Epicureanism is irrelevant. When it comes to the internal demand, as Cassius suggests, I have absolutely no doubt that someone with no basic necessities of life IS better equipped with the Epicurean thought than stoicism or any of the religions.

Bravo Cassius and thanks. I get there in the end 😊