

Is the Epicurean Always Happy?

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2024 at 2:18 PM

I am posting this to assist in our discussion of Lucretius Today Episode 215. We talked about this in our Zoom of 2/14 and a lot of scepticism was expressed, as we did also in Episode 214. However here are some texts which indicate that Epicurus might say the answer to this question is "yes," provided that we have a correct understanding of "happiness" (see especially Diogenes Laertius at 122 below). If people have comments or additional texts for us to consider for Episode 215 and thereafter, please add them here:

Diogenes Laertius

Here are some relevant excerpts from Diogenes Laertius, starting around line 117

[117] As regards the principles of living and the grounds on which we ought to choose some things and avoid others, he writes the following letter.

But before considering it let us explain what he and his followers think about the wise man. Injuries are done by men either through hate or through envy or through contempt, all of which the wise man overcomes by reasoning. When once a man has attained wisdom, he no longer has any tendency contrary to it or willingly pretends that he has. He will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom. A man cannot become wise with every kind of physical constitution, nor in every nation.

[118] And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy. Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament. The wise man will not have intercourse with any woman with whom the law forbids it, as Diogenes says in his summary of Epicurus' moral teaching. Nor will he punish his slaves, but will rather pity them and forgive any that are deserving. They do not think that the wise man will fall in love, or care about his burial. They hold that love is not sent from heaven, as Diogenes says in his . . . book, nor should the wise man make elegant speeches.

Sexual intercourse, they say, has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him.

[119] Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the *Problems* and in the work *On Nature*. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life. He will feel shame in the presence of some persons, and certainly will not insult them in his cups, so Epicurus says in the *Symposium*. Nor will he take part in public life, as he says in the first book

On Lives. Nor will he act the tyrant, or live like the Cynics, as he writes in the second book *On Lives*. Nor will he beg. Moreover, even if he is deprived of his eyesight, he will not end his whole life, as he says in the same work.

Also, the wise man will feel grief, as Diogenes says in the fifth book of the *Miscellanies*.

[120] He will engage in lawsuits and will leave writings behind him, but will not deliver speeches on public occasions. He will be careful of his possessions and will provide for the future. He will be fond of the country. He will face fortune and never desert a friend. He will be careful of his reputation in so far as to prevent himself from being despised. He will care more than other men for public spectacles.

[121] He will erect statues of others, but whether he had one himself or not, he would be indifferent. Only the Wise man could discourse rightly on music and poetry, but in practice he would not compose poems. One wise man is not wiser than another. He will be ready to make money, but only when he is in straits and by means of his philosophy. He will pay court to a king, if occasion demands. He will rejoice at another's misfortunes, but only for his correction. And he will gather together a school, but never so as to become a popular leader. He will give lectures in public, but never unless asked; he will give definite teaching and not profess doubt. In his sleep he will be as he is awake, and on occasion he will even die for a friend.

[122] They hold that faults are not all of equal gravity, that health is a blessing to some, but indifferent to others, that courage does not come by nature, but by a calculation of advantage. That friendship too has practical needs as its motive: one must indeed lay its foundations (for we sow the ground too for the sake of crops), but it is formed and maintained by means of community of life among those who have reached the fullness of pleasure. They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures. Now we must proceed to the letter.

Other Fragments (Bailey)

LETTERS TO INDIVIDUALS.

To Anaxarchus.

23. But I summon you to continuous pleasures and not to vain and empty virtues which have but disturbing hopes of results.

On Ends Book Two

Section XXV: REID EDITION

XXVII. But we dwell too long upon very simple matters. When we have once concluded and demonstrated that if everything is judged by the standard of pleasure, no room is left for either virtues or friendships, there is nothing besides on which we need greatly insist. And yet, lest it should be thought that any passage is left without reply, I will now also say a few words in answer to the remainder of your speech. Well then, whereas the whole importance of philosophy lies in its bearing on happiness, and it is from a desire for happiness alone that men have devoted themselves to this pursuit, and whereas some place happiness in one thing, some in another, while you place it in pleasure, and similarly on the other side all wretchedness you place in pain, let us first examine the nature of happiness as you conceive it.

Now you will grant me this, I suppose, that happiness, if only it exists at all, ought to lie entirely within the wise man's own control. For if the life of happiness may cease to be so, then it cannot be really happy. Who indeed has any faith that a thing which is perishable and fleeting will in his own case always continue solid and strong? But he who feels no confidence in the permanence of the blessings he possesses, must needs apprehend that he will some time or other be wretched, if he loses them. Now no one can be happy while in alarm about his most important possessions; no one then can possibly be happy. For happiness is usually spoken of not with reference to some period of time, but to permanence, nor do we talk of the life of happiness at all, unless that life be rounded off and complete, nor can a man be happy at one time, and wretched at another; since any man who judges that he can become wretched will never be happy. For when happiness has been once entered on, it is as durable as wisdom herself, who is the creator of the life of happiness, nor does it await the last days of life, as Herodotus writes that Solon enjoined upon Croesus. But I shall be reminded (as you said yourself) that Epicurus will not admit that continuance of time contributes anything to happiness, or that less pleasure is realized in a short period of time than if the pleasure were eternal.

These statements are most inconsistent ; for while he places his supreme good in pleasure, he refuses to allow that pleasure can reach a greater height in a life of boundless extent, than in one limited and moderate in length. He who places good entirely in virtue can say that happiness is consummated by the consummation of virtue, since he denies that time brings additions to his supreme good; but when a man supposes that happiness is caused by pleasure, how are his doctrines to be reconciled, if he means to affirm that pleasure is not heightened by duration? In that case, neither is pain. Or, though all the most enduring pains are also the most wretched, does length of time not render pleasure more enviable? What reason then has Epicurus for calling a god, as he does, both happy and eternal? If you take away his eternity, Jupiter will be not a whit happier than Epicurus, since both of them are in the enjoyment of the supreme good, which is pleasure. Oh, but our philosopher is subject to pain as well. Yes, but he sets it at nought; for he says that, if he were being roasted, he would call out how sweet this is! In what respect then is he inferior to the god, if not in respect of eternity? And what good does eternity bring but the highest form of pleasure, and that prolonged for ever? What boots it then to use high sounding language unless your language be consistent ? On bodily pleasure (I will

add mental, if you like, on the understanding that it also springs, as you believe, from the body) depends the life of happiness. Well, who can guarantee the wise man that this pleasure will be permanent? For the circumstances that give rise to pleasures are not within the control of the wise man, since your happiness is not dependent on wisdom herself, but on the objects which wisdom procures with a view to pleasure. Now all such objects are external to us, and what is external is in the power of chance. Thus fortune becomes lady paramount over happiness, though Epicurus says she to a small extent only crosses the path of the wise man.

Letter to Menoecus

[122] Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away. Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come. We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it.

...

Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like unto a mortal being.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 17, 2024 at 8:56 PM

There's also the complementary matter of a successful Epicurean living like a god among men. Since a god is blessed and imperturbable (or incorruptible, or immortal), this would imply that an Epicurean can be happy (or whatever word is most appropriate) all of the time.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 17, 2024 at 9:03 PM

Oops, I just read the podcast thread and see that this has already been brought up 😞

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 17, 2024 at 9:26 PM

I just wrote this in a new list on [my personal outline](#) thread:

"Pleasure and pain has natural limits because it is subject to increase and decrease, but we can learn to extend feelings of pleasure through cultivating a feeling of contentment through the memory of past pleasures, as well as gratitude for healthy functioning and the experience of being without pain."

So happiness (as a feeling of mental pleasure) comes and goes, but we can learn to extend it through cultivation of contentment.

Post by “Cassius” of February 18, 2024 at 5:16 AM

Kalosyni the question of whether we should regard happiness as something that "comes and goes" is pretty much what we are grappling with.

[Quote from Diogenes Laertius](#)

[122] They hold that faults are not all of equal gravity, that health is a blessing to some, but indifferent to others, that courage does not come by nature, but by a calculation of advantage. That friendship too has practical needs as its motive: one must indeed lay its foundations (for we sow the ground too for the sake of crops), but it is formed and maintained by means of community of life among those who have reached the fullness of pleasure. They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures.

One would think that if happiness can come and go, then being under torture would be one of the times when happiness "goes," but if Epicurus indeed said that even under torture the wise man can consider himself to be happy, then it looks like Epicurus may not have viewed

happiness as something that the wise will see "go."

[Quote from Diogenes Laertius](#)

[118] And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy.

We're going to be discussing these issues further as we proceed in Book 2.

It may be that one's mix of stimulative pleasures and pains changes constantly, but if you are wisely philosophical about life then you are constantly appreciating that you are alive and that certain parts of your mind and body are functioning well even while others are not, and you consider yourself happy no matter how bad the temporary painful stimulations are because, all things considered, you focus on the many types of pleasures available to you while you are alive, and you realize that stimulative pains are short if intense and manageable if long.

Post by "Titus" of February 19, 2024 at 3:15 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It may be that one's mix of stimulative pleasures and pains changes constantly, but if you are wisely philosophical about life then you are constantly appreciating that you are alive and that certain parts of your mind and body are functioning well even while others are not, and you consider yourself happy no matter how bad the temporary painful stimulations are because, all things considered, you focus on the many types of pleasures available to you while you are alive, and you realize that stimulative pains are short if intense and manageable if long.

EP is like a toolbox which enables us to fix any broken part. Knowing to have such a powerful item in your hands, you're able to confront any given difficulties with a positive attitude. Therefore one could say, happiness is always within reach.

Post by "Bryan" of May 30, 2024 at 10:37 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

or live like the Cynics

This topic came up in a Wednesday meeting. I said the Cynics had no clear doctrine. Diogenes Laertius does labor to give a short summary of shared Cynic ideas at 6.103. [Link here.](#)

More to the point is Philodemus on the Cynics, P.Herc. 339 col. 8 "Human excellence is sidelined, with minimal engagement in deep reflection on such matters. The individuals in question, striving for a radical purity, adopt a lifestyle reminiscent of dogs, utilizing language in a stark and unrefined manner, displaying their masturbation without disguise, and layering their garments. They engage indiscriminately in intimate relationships, readily responding to solicitations and resorting to compulsion... ...advocating for communal sharing of offspring... ...imposing; entangling themselves with their own kin, both maternal and fraternal, without reservation in pursuing intimacy -- even when it escalates to coercion; they pursue intimate interactions with other men."

Post by “Little Rocker” of June 3, 2024 at 5:27 PM

I'm very sympathetic to the idea that the Cynics don't have a philosophy or 'clear doctrine' in the sense of a system of commitments that hang together as a defensible whole. And I don't disagree that Cynicism can come across as little more than a series of colorful anecdotes. But I guess I'm sympathetic to the people who think we can ascribe some somewhat distinctive commitments to them--that virtue is often best cultivated by hard work of the physical sort rather than book-learning; that living an authentic life means being willing to reject and openly mock most of the pretenses of polite society; and that the fewer possessions the better.