

Talking About Epicurus With Someone Who Is A Stoic (Or Of Some Other Anti-Epicurean Philosophy)

Post by “Cassius” of April 8, 2018 at 8:49 PM

This thread is to kick off discussion of how to approach discussing Epicurus with someone who is a Stoic, or a fan or student of some other anti-Epicurean philosophical school.

It's possible that a table of comparisons like the following might be helpful: [A Comparison Chart: Stoic vs. Epicurean Philosophy](#)

This is a kickoff thread -- please add your suggestions.

Post by “ayraj” of December 17, 2021 at 7:52 PM

I think for me what was interesting was when I learned that Seneca had major Epicurean influences. I think for other folks with a Stoic background, it might be helpful to talk through the history of the two schools, and areas where the Stoics in previous history saw value in what the Epicureans put forward. Also hearing out the Stoic on their position may reveal that they use Epicurean reasoning as part of their Stoic "faith," if you will, and that can invite a wider conversation to open up to the ideas of Epicurus. I also think because this person would be philosophically inclined, it would be a longer-term conversation, and would be geared towards sharing thoughts "in good faith," with the hope that they at least appreciate the good in Epicurus' thoughts, and in the best case can become "a friend in the Garden." At least for me, some charity in my worldview, a good conversation, and understanding Epicurus a little more with some key source material really made a world of difference, and I'm sure it can for others as well.

Post by “Cassius” of December 17, 2021 at 11:03 PM

I agree that seeing Seneca cite Epicurus over and over favorably is very interesting to those of us (me included) who started out admiring Stoicism and Cicero.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 4:38 PM

From my past Stoic experiences (although I have to admit that I don't have that much of it), I think the best thing to do would be to look at the **why?** I think that everyone employs philosophy in order to satisfy certain beliefs.

A few examples? I strongly suspect that some people drawn to Pyrrhonism are wanting to avoid conflict and recognize that there're many ways to look at a certain problem. Stoics want to reach certain goals and employ this philosophy in order to work in high-stress environments. Aristotealians want to "be the best version of themselves". And so on.

Obviously, this is the biggest generalization possible, but please see these examples simply as examples. At least these were my personal factors why I liked these philosophies, **they are different for everyone else.** Thus, in order to speak with others about philosophy, it's of utmost importance to understand why someone is drawn so a certain philosophy. I even think that Epicureanism has a strong psychotherapeutic effect, because it replaces false with true beliefs (although that's what every sect would say, tbh). And, after I understand why someone is e.g. a Stoic, I should begin showing him why his desire to be emotionally firm won't bring him the most happiness in the long run. Of course, only if he/she wants to hear my opinion- if this person is a hard-pressed soldier, it probably isn't the best idea to tell him/her about the glorious life Epicurus led in his garden.

Thus, after I show the other person that firmness of character or complete suspension of every belief won't lead to the most happiness in the long run, I can proceed by showing another path which evidently leads to the most happiness in the long run. It feels almost surreal that so many people don't recognize that in order to be happy, they should listen to themselves, what their bodies and minds tell them. That's literally the only and single thing Nature tells us in order to be happy 😊

So, in the end, it comes down to the "WHY?" Just as analytical psychotherapy tries to find out why someone suffers from certain symptoms, the Epicurean should try to understand why someone believes that virtue is the only good, in order to then cure this non-natural and non-necessary desire of being 100% virtuous, and then replacing this belief with the right one.

While I was writing this, I began understanding the therapeutic aspect of Epicurus more and more. It's such a strange philosophy, completely alien to us- yet it's the most logically coherent one (looking at you, Stoicism!), and probably the one which will bring the most happiness and

pleasure in the long run. Well, at least I hope that 😊

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 4:46 PM

Also, at least as far as I can judge, Stoicism is a very appealing philosophy. It promises glory and honor, but most of all virtue. When I think of Stoicism, I think of a knight in shivering armor, who charges into battle with complete calmness for the good cause. Or a Cato, fighting for the survival of the Republic. In either case, it has been immensely helpful for me to recognize that **my deeds will produce the suffering of other people**. A knight will kill people, and Cato voted against the distribution of land for the poor farmers. **Your virtue** doesn't **provide happiness for other people**.

And that means that by being virtuous yourself, you harm other people. Which is the complete opposite of virtue. I think that it can initiate a thought process if one shows this contradiction. And if the other person replies "well, that doesn't matter for me"... I don't think I would like to that person, because then we have no common ground. A person who is numb to the sufferings of others isn't a person I want to chat with.

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 5:37 PM

Reading what you are saying I think these are examples of how important it is to really wrestle with that question "why.". It seems hard for many people to even ask that question about their most basic motivations. They presume for some reason that it is self evident that "being a good person" is a right answer, or if they ask (as we discuss in this week's podcast) about how to be "the best they can be" they really have no framework for analyzing what that "best" means.

That is why I think religion and even the humanist philosophies are more obstacle than help - they don't have a framework for considering and challenging questions about "why".

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 7, 2022 at 5:46 PM

Yes, exactly. Asking this „why“ is scary, and I personally am only at the very start of it. But I also think that it's the only way to a happy lief. As long as I accept that „Being a good human is the goal of life“ - a non-evident truth, I'll never be able to accept my inner beliefs and thoughts, thus: I'll never be able to accept myself. That may have almost sounded like a Defense of Scepticism, but that isn't really the case: I firmly believe that employing sceptical practice is great in order to destroy dogmas and create a void, but it has to be filled. For example, with Epicureanism 😊

And yep, I also agree that religion isn't helpful at all in understanding this „why“. It takes the simple route by proclaiming God's will. Easy solution for a difficult problem.

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2022 at 6:37 PM

I absolutely agree. And it isn't really a function of "skepticism" -- because I think the evidence is clear that Epicurus was against radical skepticism, and DeWitt will speak to you on that.

The question really comes down to, in a real sense, "What evidence or argument am I willing to consider to be true?"

And although we don't have nearly as much text left on that issue as we would like, I think what we do have is pretty clear and helpful about the direction Epicurus was going in his work on "canonics."

Post by “Godfrey” of January 7, 2022 at 10:53 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Asking this „why“ is scary, and I personally am only at the very start of it. But I also think that it's the only way to a happy lief.

It IS scary! Especially when you start with the Physics and understand Epicurus' atomism and cosmology and their implications. But then studying and understanding the Canon provides a solid grounding in the here and now. And, at least for me, it's only at this point that the Ethics really makes sense.

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

It's such a strange philosophy, completely alien to us- yet it's the most logically coherent one (looking at you, Stoicism!), and probably the one which will bring the most happiness and pleasure in the long run. Well, at least I hope that 😊

You're right, it is logically coherent. It's a complete worldview, and also one that is highly consistent with modern science. And I too think it will bring the most happiness and pleasure, the best life. The more you study, the more you'll find that it's much less strange and alien than it now seems: in fact you may find that it's perfectly obvious. The sad thing is that so many of the texts have been lost, and the philosophy has been maligned and misrepresented by so many rivals over the millennia, that we all have to go through this process of piecing it together for ourselves.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 3:35 AM

[Cassius](#), I completely agree. There are some things where it doesn't make sense to believe them, while there are other things which we have to believe in. E.g., I believe that every person has basic human rights- if I stopped believing in that, that would mean that I can't judge Nazism as a terrible political ideal. And that would lead to some terrible conclusions.

[Godfrey](#), yes!!! And I now also begin to realise how distorted the Epicurean image in media actually is. I can't recount how often I've read that „painlessness is the goal of life“, or about the katastematic and kinematic pleasures (which weren't original for Epicurus, if I understand it correctly).

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 6:48 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

E.g., I believe that every person has basic human rights- if I stopped believing in that, that would mean that I can't judge Nazism as a terrible political ideal. And that would lead to some terrible conclusions.

Of course i am going to challenge you (EPICURUS is going to challenge you) on exactly that point. Not that you should not judge Nazism (or Communism or Maoism or any other ism that you judge awful) to be awful, but that you must judge it with absolute clarity that it is YOU, and people like you, who find it awful -- not that there is a supernatural god, or a Platonic realm of ideas or even a "basic human right" -- because those things, even "basic human right" are not established by Nature and are not vindicated by Nature. Unless YOU and people like you take action to express your reaction against the views that you find repulsive, then those views can and will triumph. And THAT is what leads to terrible results -- when people start thinking that supernatural gods, or supernatural realms of ideas, will do their own work for them.

I realize how challenging this is -- Don in particular will agree with us how challenging this is, but I think it is the only logical conclusion to reach when you apply Epicurus consistently. That's where Godfrey's statement comes in:

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

It IS scary! Especially when you start with the Physics and understand Epicurus' atomism and cosmology and their implications. But then studying and understanding the Canon provides a solid grounding in the here and now. And, at least for me, it's only at this point that the Ethics really makes sense.

I think one of the best ways to deal with your concern SmoothieKiwi is to focus on the issue that Epicurus is not telling you to ignore your feelings of abhorrence toward particular things, as the Stoics might. He is telling you to implement your feeling of abhorrence, and fight against those things as strongly as you can, because if you don't, then your worse fears may well materialize.

And one other thing that i like to state in this context is as to your choice of opponents to reference with the implication that they are uniquely evil, or a good example of the worst kind of evil. I think it is important to recognize in the Epicurean worldview that there is only pleasure and pain, and that just like the word "pleasure" is a placeholder for all kinds of things that produce a feeling of pleasure in us, the word "pain" is also a placeholder. It is another discussion to go into this (which we need to explore) but it's pretty clear in Epicurus that there is no absolute ranking of things that bring "the best pleasure" or "the worst pain" except in very abstract and general terms. Pleasure and pain are very individual and contextual, and what one of us today considers the supreme evil because it stirs in us the worse pains, is going to be held as only an academic curiosity at another place and time.

I have a friend who somewhere picked up the example of saying to himself "dead babies, dead babies, dead babies" when he felt the need to immediately sober up in a very serious situation. All of us can summon up such images that strike the worst feelings of abhorrence in our minds. So i make this point not because I want to make a political point about Nazism vs Communism vs Capitalism or vs Islam or Christianity or Judaism or whatever, but because I think it is an important point of theory to recognize that what we consider to be "evil" comes in many forms,

and that it is important to always apply the ultimate theoretical point: there is nothing intrinsically good but pleasure, and nothing intrinsically bad but pain. No matter who our worst enemy and symbol of evil might be, they too were / are people, and from their point of view there is nothing inherently "evil" about them. It is up to us (and to them) to pursue and to bear the fruits of their actions in terms of supporting our view of the pleasurable life and opposing our view of the painful life. The universe does not do it for us. As stated by Torquatus in explaining Epicurus' position:

Quote

Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 7:13 AM

I knew that you would do that 😊 And yes, you're exactly right- I won't even argue with you on that-, yet it's very difficult for me to accept that.

Quote

because those things, even "basic human right" are not established by Nature and are not vindicated by Nature.

You're right, stop pouring salt into the wound 😡

Quote

He is telling you to implement your feeling of abhorrence, and fight against those things as strongly as you can, because if you don't, then your worse fears may well materialize.

And that's where a problem for me personally arises. I'm disgusted by many thing- too many things. In accordance with the „no political stuff“ rule here on the forum, I won't provide specific examples, but I hope that it's understandable what I mean. If I'm going to fight against all of the things I'm disgusted about, then there wouldn't be time left to enjoy life and write on this forum. And then I might as well adopt Stoicism, because then my life would be a constant war for the greater good. And I'm not sure if that's the kind of life I want.

Quote

No matter who our worst enemy and symbol of evil might be, they too were / are people, and from their point of view there is nothing inherently "evil" about them

These are words of a Sceptic, aren't they? 😊

Post by "Cassius" of January 8, 2022 at 12:43 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

These are words of a Sceptic, aren't they?

Actually no, I would not admit that. I would think a skeptic would ultimately say about everything "We just don't know and there is no right or wrong answer to anything."

I think Epicurus is taking exactly the opposite position, but he is being clear that there are some things we do know with certainty apply to everyone everywhere all the time (no supernatural gods; nothing eternal but matter and void; the soul does not survive the death of the body) but that that there are some things that apply only on a local basis (I like chocolate; you like vanilla).

So I think it's pretty clear that Epicurus would encourage everyone to indeed feel their emotions as deeply as possible when they find something repulsive, and to act on those emotions, but that he would also so "Be sure that you realize what you're acting on is "local" to you, and don't make the mistake of thinking you're fighting for some kind of eternal truth established by supernatural gods or "eternal ideas" or intentional-acting Nature, because those things just don't exist.

I probably didn't need to type that though because I am confident you see where this is all going. NOT in an endorsement of any particular political position, but in the acknowledgement that we as beings of nature operate most successfully, even in political affairs, when we acknowledge the reality of nature and work within Nature and not against it.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 8, 2022 at 3:14 PM

That makes sense, and thanks for clarifying- it never is wrong to clarify something. I just thought it's really funny because I read similar lines in "Pyrrho's way: The Ancient Greek version of Buddhism", and I simply thought about that 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 4:42 PM

The whole issue of skepticism and dogmatism and knowledge and epistemology and canonicity is all very tricky, and it seems it is one of the least well developed in Epicurean discussions and even here on the forum.

There is a lot of information in Philodemus "On Signs / On Methods of Inference" that would bear on these topics that we simply haven't had time to explore, but I really encourage anyone interested in that line to start the relevant discussion threads.

Because therein (in epistemology) lays the answer to a lot of the confusion about Epicurus, in my view.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 5, 2022 at 5:42 AM

one thing I didn't appreciate when I was younger (around 2017) was that the physics of Epicureanism is the foundation of the ethics. Its not something that we can let behind but it should be something that we mention with out ethics.

Many modern "philosophies of life" deny the physics of their founders, which means they have no foundation for their ethics. The ancients realised that we must draw our ethics from what we think of the world..I think this is key and something I'm only appreciating lately.

Post by “Don” of May 5, 2022 at 5:54 AM

Well put, [Eoghan Gardiner](#) .

One thing I find fascinating is that one can modify Epicurus's Physics to accommodate or incorporate some modern scientific findings, and it doesn't change the philosophy or its practical application. There aren't many (any?) 2,000+ year old philosophies of life that can do

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/378-talking-about-epicurus-with-someone-who-is-a-stoic-or-of-some-other-anti-epicure/>

that.