

Elena Nicoli - An Excellent Presentation On Epicurean Pleasure

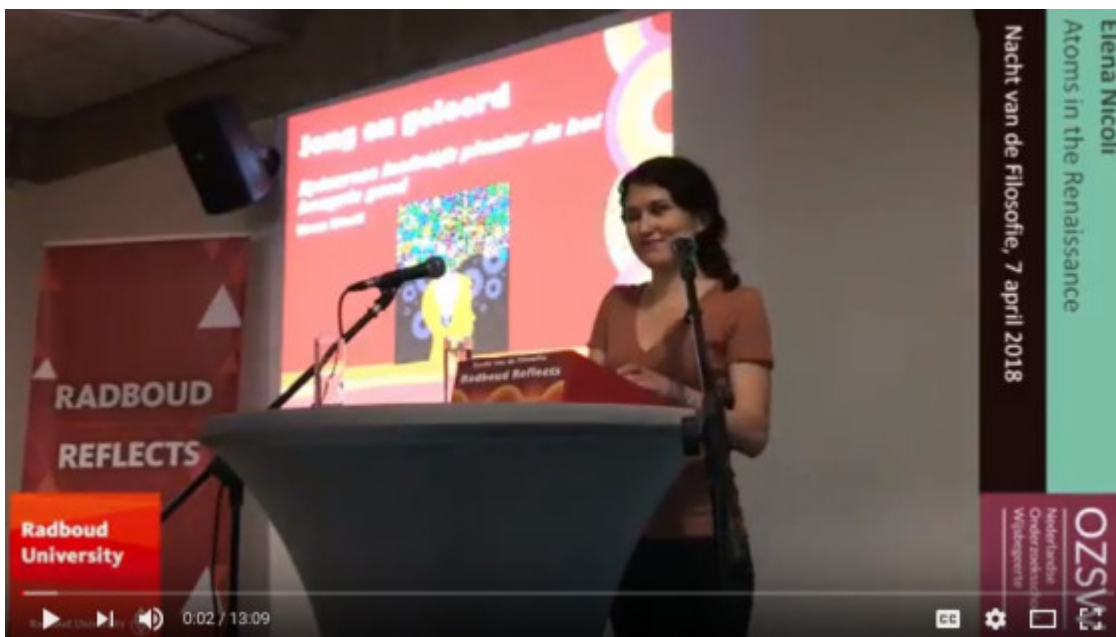
Post by "Cassius" of April 16, 2018 at 4:18 PM

I urge everyone in this group to watch [Elena Nicoli's excellent presentation on Epicurean pleasure](#), which the Dutch Research School of Philosophy has humorously mis-titled as "Atoms in the Renaissance." As quickly as I can I am going to prepare an outline of the major points of her talk and attach that to this thread for discussion and reference in the future. I think you will find that this talk is easy to follow, very clearly presented, and does a very good job of presenting the "standard" interpretation of Epicurean ethical theory on pleasure. In my view Ms. Nicoli avoids the worst of the conclusions of the standard theory. Even though she presumes the validity of the kinetic / katastematic distinction that is disputed by [Nikolsky](#), Wenham, and Gosling & Taylor (as detailed in our files section), she emphasizes the critical point: that Epicurus embraced "BOTH" of the two categories in dispute. As a result, she gives no hint of believing that life would best be spent living in a cave living a life of subsistence with only bread and water.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5AQ655DqIc>

Just as with the presentation Ms. Nicoli recently posted to her Academia page ("[Reassessing Nussbaum's Interpretation of Epicurean Therapy](#)") it's clear that she is willing to challenge the orthodox criticism's of Epicurean philosophy. That presentation defends Epicurus against Nussbaum's charges that Epicurean philosophy is "not real philosophy" and that Epicurus "numbs the intellect and critical thinking." Those points alone would merit a major award from Lucian for "striking a blow for Epicurus!"

I urge everyone in the group to view this video as an example of how to present Epicurean philosophy to those who know very little about it, and then take a look at her [Academia page](#) and review her excellent writing on Epicurus.



Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2018 at 10:28 PM

Here is a summary of the presentation, prepared by me for discussion purposes.

Summary of A Presentation By Elena Nicoli

1. In recent times her motivation and enthusiasm were drained because her objectives seemed difficult or impossible to achieve.
2. People were making all sorts of suggestions as to what she should pursue, but she wasn't sure about any of them.
3. She asked herself: Must everything that is worth pursuing be so difficult?
4. The answer she found was in the research in front of her - in her study of Lucretius and Epicurean philosophy.
5. Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosophy who taught a form of what is called "hedonism"
6. Epicurus taught that the one thing toward which our actions should be directed is "pleasure."
7. But if she accepts this, should she not be at a party or drinking instead of giving this lecture?
8. The answer is "no," because Epicurus' definition of pleasure is not what we generally understand it to be.
9. Epicurus did not suggest that we live a life of partying. In fact, he suggested living a modest life in the countryside, and living it simply, with bread and cheese, and not a dissolute lifestyle.
10. Epicurus said we should consider our actions from three perspectives:
 1. Are they natural and necessary? These are things we must have such as food and shelter.
 2. Are they natural but not necessary? These are things like sexual intercourse and fine foods. We should indulge these only occasionally.
 3. Are they neither natural nor necessary?
 1. These are things like wealth, power, and fame.
 2. We should never pursue these because the pleasure we derive from them is not genuine pleasure.
 3. These feel pleasurable but they do so because society tells us that they are pleasurable.
 4. Also, we can never get enough of these pleasures, and if we pursue them we will never feel satisfied and this will bring anxiety. No matter what we achieve we will always need more - but it never works like that - we get accustomed to new levels and we always want more.

4. What we really need to be happy is simple - food drink, shelter, small amount of money to live decently, and good friends.
 5. We can reassure ourselves that these we can easily get at any time, and these are all we really need to be happy.
11. What did Epicurus really teach?
1. According to Epicurus highest form of pleasure is static pleasure - to be free from mental and physical pain. Epicurus was criticized for this because seems to some like being being asleep.
 2. But this criticism is not fair because Epicurus did not intend that we seek ONLY the removal of pain, this is a state in which not only is pain absent, but it is a state of relaxed freshness that feels good.
 3. In addition, Epicurus also held there are kinetic pleasures -pleasures in motion - such as friends, massages, walking on sunny day, and these are included in our goals.
 4. So Epicurus taught the pursuit of pleasure, not overindulgence.
12. To apply these ideas to everyday life:
1. This is a model for inspiration for every day, not an end goal to reach before we can consider ourselves as satisfied.
 2. What does it mean to live according to Epicurus?
 1. It means to realize that even the absence of pain is a pleasure. This is difficult to accept because we think of pleasure as pleasing to the senses, but looking at it that way is unsatisfiable and increasingly difficult to get.
 2. So what we should try to do is to identify happiness in our minds as a state of no physical pain and no mental concerns.
 3. But we can also embellish this state with pleasures in motion - friends, good food, and walking on sunny day - because pain is not present in these.
 3. As another practical example: Before saying yes to any job or task, ask yourself: "Is this what I myself want, or am I doing this to please society? Will this choice really make my life more pleasurable, or will it bring more pain than pleasure?"
13. In sum:
1. The things that really matter don't have to be so hard. [PD21](#): "He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. Thus he has no longer any need of things which involve struggle."
 2. Therefore embracing hedonism and Epicurus could be the best thing we can do for ourselves.
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Post by "Cassius" of April 16, 2018 at 11:08 PM

Here are some initial thoughts on questions that might go through minds in the audience listening to this presentation. Are there ways to head off these questions or point the way to the answer in a short talk such as this?

1. All this sounds fine, but why should I accept Epicurus' opinion that a simple life is all I should want out of life? Aren't there more important things than pleasure and pain? Shouldn't I live so that I will go to heaven, and not go to hell? Those things are more important than pleasure and pain aren't they?"
2. Haven't we always been taught that nothing good comes easily? Why should the best part of life be easy to obtain? I see people around me suffering and dying in misery and pain all the time. They didn't find a happy life easy to obtain. Doesn't that show that Epicurus was wrong?
3. I seem to hear you saying that avoidance of pain is the highest goal. Are you really saying that? If so, why shouldn't I avoid all pain by killing myself?
4. Ok, we won't go to extremes like killing ourselves, After all, moderation in all things, right? But I hear you saying that the simplest life is the best. If I really want the best life, shouldn't I go ONLY for bread, water, and a cave to get out of the weather? That would be the purest application of Epicurus, wouldn't it?
5. Did I hear you say that we should never want power? I live in a pretty bad neighborhood, and the people in the country next door are talking about invading our country. Right about now I would really like the power to put the criminals in jail and the power to stop the invaders before they burn my house. How can that be wrong - but you said I should NEVER seek power?
6. OK now I hear you saying that "static" pleasure is the best kind of pleasure, and that comes from absence of pain and not from the senses. But then you've also said that static pleasure "feels good." Are you trying to have it both ways? If the best kind of pleasure feels good, then I understand what you mean? But what kind of pleasure is worth having that I can't feel?
7. You say that your version of the pleasurable life can be satisfied, but that people who chase sensual pleasure can never satisfy their quest. Well tell me, then, how much time do I need to satisfy your definition of a pleasurable life? Can I take enough pain pills til I feel no pain, lie down in my bed, and stay there til I stop breathing from an overdose? If I've reached that state of total painlessness, there really isn't anything more for me in Epicurean theory is there? Why should I be concerned if I die tonight from an overdose? I won't feel any pain at all, and I'll feel "high" on the way there, so isn't that what you are telling me is the best way of life?
8. I have heard that Epicurus also said "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. (VS 63)" How do you reconcile that statement with the view that the simplest life is the best life?

[Reminder - no criticism of the original presentation is expressed or implied! This is purely an exercise to consider how we might ourselves present Epicurean ideas to our friends or to small audiences - and at the same time the exercise will help us consider our own understanding of the philosophy!!]

Post by “Hiram” of April 18, 2018 at 10:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

All this sounds fine, but why should I accept Epicurus' opinion that a simple life is all I should want out of life?

1. Haven't we always been taught that nothing good comes easily? ...
2. Did I hear you say that we should never want power? ...
3. ...how much time do I need to satisfy your definition of a pleasurable life? Can I take enough pain pills ...

Many of these questions are easily addressed if we take up Philodemus' way of teaching in terms of "natural measure of" wealth, etc. I applied this to the idea of a natural measure of community, and some commentators of Philodemus have argued that this natural measure is based on what is natural and necessary. Once THAT measure of that is secured, the rest is variation in pleasure.

We could argue that there's also a NATURAL measure of power (over one's space, security, and business) that one must secure if one wants self-sufficiency.

Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2018 at 10:54 AM

"some commentators of Philodemus have argued that this natural measure is based on what is natural and necessary."

Part of my thinking in asking these questions is to lay the foundation at the most basic level possible. WHY should using a "natural and necessary" standard be the right answer?

You ended with "..... if one wants self-sufficiency."

WHY should one want self-sufficiency? Shouldn't we depend on God? Shouldn't we depend on

our government, or our society, or our friends?

In a short presentation it's not possible to go into all these issues in detail, but I think it IS possible to point to where the answers are found, in Epicurean physics (infinite, eternal, no supernatural gods), and in Epicurean canonics (reliance upon senses/anticipations/pleasure-pain as the only contact with reality, rather than abstract speculation).

In other words, even in a short presentation it should be possible to point out that Epicurean ethics are not arbitrary, but derive straight from the more fundamental presumptions about the nature of the universe and the nature of man.

Post by “Hiram” of April 18, 2018 at 11:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In other words, even in a short presentation it should be possible to point out that Epicurean ethics are not arbitrary, but derive straight from the more fundamental presumptions about the nature of the universe and the nature of man.

Yes, you could draw a tree of assumptions that branch off from base assumptions. But you would not want to do this every single time you teach a class on Epicurean philosophy. Once certain assumptions are made that are clearly established and clearly founded on previous ones, they can serve as starting points for future investigations. This is how all science evolves.

Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2018 at 1:43 PM

I agree definitely that the audience and the situation determines the context. Talks which assume that pleasure and happy living are the goal are very useful. However the pattern that I see, and that I think far outweighs in number anything else, is that if we only stay on this level most people see this as just another "self-help" class to be filed away on their bookshelf with 100 others. Of course "most people" are not necessarily sitting in the audience - people who have the initiative to come to a philosophical presentation may already be in the camp of presuming that pleasure is good. On the other hand, it might be the opposite- that people who come to a PHILOSOPHICAL presentation presume the standard view - that "virtue" is the good, and that "happiness" is not defined in terms of pleasure, but in the standard non-Epicurean

ways.

In short I think we definitely need both types of presentations.

Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2018 at 3:03 PM

Here is something else that I think is an aspect of this that we have seen on the Facebook group: When the stress is on "I've made the mistake of chasing commercialism / the rat-race and now I see that simple is beautiful" we come at the entire philosophy from the point of someone who has made incorrect decisions and to a greater or lesser extent warped their personality and/or emotions into focusing on the pain of their mistakes. Such people are naturally looking for help - for medicine - and their focus is on reducing pain as their primary goal. And such people are naturally going to think that the full message of Epicurus is "live simply so as to avoid pain."

But what if we approached the philosophy as they must have for generations in the ancient world? What if we approached it as emotionally healthy people - as many if not most young people are because they have not yet been "damaged" by incorrect thinking? What if we approached this from the point of view: "I am young and healthy and happy and I am not afraid of anything - I just want to know how to live my life so I can take charge of it and pursue life with all the gusto I can give it!"

The non-warped, non-damaged person doesn't start from the presumption that life is all about avoiding pain. Such a person wants to know a framework of analysis from which he or she can decide for themselves what to pursue, and how to pursue it. Such people want to know whether the best life is dictated by a god, or by society, or by "virtue" or by some other set of absolute abstractions that they have to follow in order not to waste their lives.

And the answers that such people are looking for in Epicurus include (1) this is your ONLY chance at life (2) there's no god telling you what to do (3) there are no universal abstractions telling you what to do, (4) NATURE tells you what to do through pleasure and pain, and (5) if you grasp the true implications of all this, you are going to pursue pleasure as aggressively (while yes, also intelligently) as you can. And they will realize that the ONLY reason we "live simply" is so that we can maximize pleasure, because otherwise if our goal were solely to avoid pain, we would commit suicide and be done with life.

So not only will the points of interest be different depending on how badly warped the audience is, but the conclusions to be drawn about how to pursue pleasure, and why, are likely to be drastically different depending on that same factor.

I don't believe that Epicurean philosophy would ever have been popular in the ancient world, and certainly not in the Roman world, if the positive/activist interpretation I am describing were not understood to be the real message of Epicurus.

At least for myself, I want to devote at least as much attention to putting forward the positive full framework that explains WHY the ethical conclusions are correct as I do to helping people who just want a short-cut out of their latest wrong turn.

Post by “Hiram” of April 20, 2018 at 10:18 AM

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/hap...e-of-knowledge/>

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 7, 2018 at 9:56 AM

"It turns out that embracing Hedonism and Epicureanism may be the best, and the kindest thing we can do for ourselves". I am beginning to agree with this, she did a very good presentation and Cassius your questions are exactly the ones which would be asked my audience, I am going to try answer some of them as a "neophyte" Epicurean:

All this sounds fine, but why should I accept Epicurus' opinion that a simple life is all I should want out of life? Aren't there more important things than pleasure and pain? Shouldn't I live so that I will go to heaven, and not go to hell? Those things are more important than pleasure and pain aren't they?

1. To an Epicurean there is no life after death. Living is the presence of sensation, everything you do is based on a sensation of some sort (thinking, eating, sleeping) To an Epicurean there is no separation of body and mind they are one in the same when the body shuts down so does the brain.

Haven't we always been taught that nothing good comes easily? Why should the best part of life be easy to obtain? I see people around me suffering and dying in misery and pain all the time. They didn't find a happy life easy to obtain. Doesn't that show that Epicurus was wrong?

2. Things which people pursue in modern society such as excess wealth, power and others opinion have no limit, they can never be sated even for a short time on the contrast things

provided by Nature can be gained easily and sated easily such as food, warmth and relaxation. Modern people have a wrong view on what makes them happy.

I seem to hear you saying that avoidance of pain is the highest goal. Are you really saying that? If so, why shouldn't I avoid all pain by killing myself?

3. The highest goal is pleasure. To an Epicurean the best way to avoid pain is to be "full" of pleasure (and I would explain the full cup here)

Ok, we won't go to extremes like killing ourselves, After all, moderation in all things, right? But I hear you saying that the simplest life is the best. If I really want the best life, shouldn't I go ONLY for bread, water, and a cave to get out of the weather? That would be the purest application of Epicurus, wouldn't it?

4. Epicureans aren't ascetics, bread and water can easily be attained and are an easy pleasure to get (of course in modern times there are a lot more easily got foods) but this doesn't mean that we can't partake in other pleasures, in fact we definitely should but just remember that bread and water are always there, if other pleasures can't be got.

did I hear you say that we should never want power? I live in a pretty bad neighborhood, and the people in the country next door are talking about invading our country. Right about now I would really like the power to put the criminals in jail and the power to stop the invaders before they burn my house. How can that be wrong - but you said I should NEVER seek power?

5. Then I would say it is acceptable, if a rival nation threatens your ability to pursue the true goal of life and wishes to enforce pain on you and your loved ones, then yes get power. The power which Epicurus refers to is power over people, power over the universe or in other words a power which has no true end and can never be sated. This view of power is false as you will never reach pleasure from it because it can never be sated, even for short amount of time.

OK now I hear you saying that "static" pleasure is the best kind of pleasure, and that comes from absence of pain and not from the senses. But then you've also said that static pleasure "feels good." Are you trying to have it both ways? If the best kind of pleasure feels good, then I understand what you mean? But what kind of pleasure is worth having that I can't feel?

6. (I am not sure about this one but I will make an attempt) - To an Epicurean all pleasures must be felt, a static pleasure is where you simply don't have to do anything for it to occur. (perhaps this has something to do with the full cup analogy? I am not sure how to answer this sorry)

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2018 at 10:47 AM

Wow, thanks for the detailed discussion Eoghan. Here are some initial further questions I would raise:

A - Haven't we always been taught that nothing good comes easily? Why should the best part of life be easy to obtain? I see people around me suffering and dying in misery and pain all the time. They didn't find a happy life easy to obtain. Doesn't that show that Epicurus was wrong?

2. Things which people pursue in modern society such as excess wealth, power and others opinion have no limit, they can never be sated even for a short time on the contrast things provided by Nature can be gained easily and sated easily such as food, warmth and relaxation. Modern people have a wrong view on what makes them happy.

<<< Yes, as to those who are in fact pursuing excess wealth and other limitless goals. But what about the great numbers of people who in fact live humble lives, but who find themselves trampled into the dust by many factors, many of which are out of their control, regardless of their own attitudes? What about them? Doesn't their tragic situation invalidate Epicurean philosophy, or at least mean that it is worthless to them?

B - Ok, we won't go to extremes like killing ourselves, After all, moderation in all things, right? But I hear you saying that the simplest life is the best. If I really want the best life, shouldn't I go ONLY for bread, water, and a cave to get out of the weather? That would be the purest application of Epicurus, wouldn't it?

4. Epicureans are ascetics, bread and water can easily be attained and are an easy pleasure to get (of course in modern times there are a lot more easily got foods) but this doesn't mean that we can't partake in other pleasures, in fact we definitely should but just remember that bread and water are always there, if other pleasures can't be got.

<<< according to dictionary.com, ascetic means: 1. a person who dedicates his or her life to a pursuit of contemplative ideals and practices extreme self-denial or self-mortification for religious reasons. 2. a person who leads an austere simple life, especially one who abstains from the normal pleasures of life or denies himself or herself material satisfaction. Is it really accurate to say that Epicureans are ascetic?

<<<<"this doesn't mean that we can't partake in other pleasures, in fact we definitely should..." You say "in fact we definitely should" partake in other pleasures. **Why**, if the simplest life is the best? How should we choose between a life of 70 years on bread and water with no pain, versus a life of 30 years with some pain on the mountaintop full of vivid sensual

and mental pleasures? How do we incorporate the statements: " And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure" and "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest"

And as you indicate, question 6 still needs more explanation, but that one is the most difficult without pretty extensive explanation of the letter to Menoecus. Nevertheless, most internet discussion of Epicurus makes this question the focus of the philosophy....

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 7, 2018 at 10:50 AM

Hi Cassius thanks for the reply I meant to say "Epicureans AREN'T ascetics". I will change that now!

Also I will use this message as a platform to respond to you later!