

November 2024 General Thoughts On What Epicurean Philosophy Means To Me.

Post by “Cassius” of November 29, 2024 at 11:25 AM

(I decided to post this on Facebook and Twitter just to keep up Epicurean conversation over there. There's nothing new here that we don't frequently discuss on the forum, but I'll post it anyway as another formulation of what we often discuss.)

I see the teachings of Epicurus as coming down mostly to this:

Whether you like it or not, and regardless of what anyone tells you, the following things are true:

1. There are no supernatural gods or forces.
2. Nature has no absolute standards of right and wrong to which you must conform.
3. Some things that will happen to you in your life will happen by chance, some will happen by choice, and some will happen by necessity.
4. While some things happen by necessity, there is in Nature no force which has the power to force you to think and act in a particular way.
5. Nature gives you only the feelings of pleasure and pain by which to determine what to choose and what to avoid.
6. If you are wise you will consider Pleasure to include everything in life that is agreeable to you, and Pain to include everything in life that is disagreeable to you.
7. All too soon you will be too old to do the things that you can do when you are young.
8. All too soon you will die and forever after cease to exist.
9. At death your consciousness will come to an end, and you will then never again have any consciousness or experience anything whatsoever.
10. After death there will be no reward and no punishment for what you do in life.
11. At the end of your life the only opinion that matters as to how you spent your time is your own.
12. The question you must confront every moment of your life is: Given these truths about the way things are, how do you want to spend the time that is available to you?

Post by “Cassius” of November 30, 2024 at 7:33 AM

A response from [Facebook](#):

This is written with the help of Claude 3.5:

Let me analyze this interpretation of Epicurean philosophy point by point. While there are some accurate elements, there are also some oversimplifications and potential misunderstandings.

Accurate elements:

- Points 1 and 2 broadly align with Epicurean thought, though it's more nuanced. Epicurus didn't deny the existence of gods but argued they were distant and uninvolved in human affairs.
- Points 3 and 4 capture Epicurus's views on free will and determinism fairly well. He believed in a form of libertarian free will within atomic determinism.
- Points 8-10 about death and the afterlife are largely consistent with Epicurean teachings.

Areas needing refinement or correction:

- Points 5-6 significantly oversimplify Epicurus's complex theory of pleasure. He distinguished between:

- * Kinetic pleasures (active pleasures)
- * Katastematic pleasures (static pleasures, like peace of mind)

He emphasized that the highest good was not maximizing momentary pleasures but achieving ataraxia (tranquility) and aponia (absence of physical pain).

- The text presents pleasure too individualistically ("agreeable to you"). Epicurus emphasized friendship and community as essential to the good life. He ran a philosophical school called "The Garden" where communal living was central.
- Point 11 contradicts Epicurus's emphasis on friendship and community. He would say that the opinions of our friends and philosophical community matter greatly.
- Point 12 frames things too individualistically. Epicurus would say the question is how to live wisely in accordance with nature and in community with others to achieve tranquility.

Key missing elements:

1. The importance of philosophy in achieving happiness
2. The role of friendship and community
3. The distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires

4. The emphasis on moderation and self-sufficiency

5. The therapeutic aspect of Epicurean philosophy - its role in relieving anxiety about death, gods, and fate.

Post by “Cassius” of November 30, 2024 at 7:33 AM

My response to the Facebook post:

Good use of a chatbot! Of course I disagree with it, because it doesn't consider the nuances of the reason for the post or the subtlety of Epicurean philosophy, but it's helpful to draw out the issues.

It also systematically reveals the standard non-Epicurean perspective on Epicurus common among those who are primarily Stoic or Humanist or do not take the time to read the texts closely enough and take Epicurus seriously. Here are a few responses:

1 - Yes friendship is important, but friendship is not an end in itself. Friendship is desirable because it is among the most important tools to obtain pleasure. Friendship and community are subservient to pleasure, not the other way around. That's a thread of error that runs through the entire AI analysis.

2. Same for the AI positions on katastematic and kinetic pleasure and tranquility. Those are aspects and types of pleasure, but not the goal in itself. Pleasure is the goal, not some single type of pleasure or tranquility. Epicurus says that PLEASURE is the alpha and omega of a blessed life, not tranquility.

3. Communal living is also a "tool" and not an end in itself. Epicurus in fact specifically is recorded to have held that community holding of money is not appropriate, because holding money in common is not the way friendship operates. The AI bot is misinterpreting the issue of individualism vs collectivism as if collectivism or community or friendship were the goal of Epicurus. The goal of Epicurus is pleasure - which includes the pleasure of your friends, because the welfare of your friends is pleasurable to you - and there are times when you will even die for a friend. But every random stranger is not your friend, and you have no duty or obligation to them except to the extent that other people contribute to your goal of pleasure.

4. Same with necessary and unnecessary desires. The principle of the classification, as Torquatus explains, is that by considering these factors you can estimate the amount of pleasure and pain that will arise from certain choices and avoidances. But it is clearly established that you will sometimes choose pain in order to obtain a pleasure that is greater than the pain. Once again, this analysis is a tool, not an end in itself. Many tools are possible,

but no tool - especially the tool of "virtue"- is an end in itself, nor is any tool choiceworthy unless it leads to pleasurable living.

Post by “Cassius” of December 3, 2024 at 9:18 AM

Anothe Facebook exchange in this thread:

Greg Anastasi : This is an excellent thread! I've spent a lot of time looking at Stoicism. And I'm circling around to Epicureanism. so I'm still "getting the vibe".

Cassius:

Welcome Greg!

I suspect you're using "vibe" informally, but it is a good word to think about. Epicurus rejected the idea of there being a "harmony" of the spheres (Lucretius specifically addresses that) because such ideas presume some kind of supernatural creative and guiding force behind the universe. Ultimately and regardless of how the modern stoics try to rebake the cake, Stoicism makes sense only if you take the position that there is an ultimate divine force that justifies the pursuit of "virtue" as the ultimate goal.

That's why I think when you drill down to brass tacks, and you eliminate concerns about the supernatural as Epicurus did, you then realize that everything worth having is going to come to you - if at all - in this life, because there is no other.

One of the most difficult hurdles to overcome is that of seeing that the Stoics and others are misrepresenting Epicurus in accusing him of equating "pleasure" with "sex, drugs, and rock and roll."

Epicurean philosophy is very clear that if you are alive and experiencing anything at all, what you are experiencing should be viewed as either pleasure or pain. That means that all experiences of life which are not explicitly painful fall within the term "pleasure," and that includes everything worthwhile and meaningful in life, not just sensual pleasure, but all the art and literature and wisdom and nobility that the Stoics want to claim for themselves but which they at at same time hold to consider merely preferable or to be indifferent about, all for the sake of the ambiguous word "virtue."

Epicurean philosophy incorporates the benefits of stoicism (including appreciation of calmness of mind and the need for work and exertion and reason-based action) by recognizing that we sometimes choose pain in order to obtain a greater pleasure. In sum, Epicurean philosophy

provides what some see as the benefits of stoicism, but explains the reasoning and full analysis properly, in terms of all of the desirable aspects of life as constituting pleasure, which provides a sound basis for a complete approach to life that is consistent with a totally natural universe.

Post by “Patrikios” of December 4, 2024 at 2:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Good use of a chatbot! Of course I disagree with it, because it doesn't consider the nuances of the reason for the post or the subtlety of Epicurean philosophy, but it's helpful to draw out the issues.

Cassius,

I agree with you about AI Chatbots giving over-simplified explanations. However, it can be a tool for authors to use to check the content versus intended audience level of understanding. For grins ☺, I asked my Personal.AI philosophy persona to read your text. Here's the response with very positive views overall.

“Thanks for providing the post by Cassius Amicus. I can now offer a more informed comparison with Epicurean philosophy.

The post aligns closely with key tenets of Epicureanism. It accurately reflects Epicurus' materialist worldview, rejection of divine intervention, and focus on natural explanations for phenomena. The emphasis on pleasure and pain as guides for decision-making is quintessentially Epicurean.

However, I'm less certain about some nuances. For instance, Epicurus' view on free will and determinism was more complex than point 4 suggests. Also, the stark finality of death described in points 8-10, while generally aligned with Epicurean thought, might be slightly oversimplified.

The post captures Epicurus' ethical hedonism well, particularly in points 5 and 6. The focus on living in the present (points 7-8) and personal responsibility (point 11) are also consistent with Epicurean teachings.

Overall, this post provides a concise, largely accurate summary of Epicurean

philosophy, though it may oversimplify some concepts. Would you like me to elaborate on any specific points or aspects of Epicurean philosophy for comparison?"

While my AI persona was reluctant to offer a classroom grade without more context of intent, it did offer this praise.

"If this was meant as a brief, accessible summary for a general audience, it might even merit a full A for its clarity and overall accuracy."

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2024 at 3:47 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

Also, the stark finality of death described in points 8-10, while generally aligned with Epicurean thought, might be slightly oversimplified.

That's an interesting observation - I wonder what kind of nuance on "stark finality" the chatbot thinks exists? 😊

Post by "Martin" of December 5, 2024 at 1:20 AM

Quote

...the chatbot thinks...

The chatbot does not think. Probably, it uses "oversimplified" because it has more detailed texts on the topic in the training data.