

How Would Epicurus Analyze The Slogan "Live Free Or Die" As An Ethical Guide?

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2024 at 10:04 PM

We had several good conversations in our Wednesday night Zoom tonight, and one of them stemmed from a nearby discussion started by Kalosyni:

Post

[RE: Why Minimizing All Desire Is Incorrect \(And What To Do Instead\)](#)

Yes Joshua has in my mind quoted the best citation that can be raised in support of the proposition that all desires should be limited: ""If you wish," said he, "to make Pythocles rich, do not add to his store of money, but subtract from his desires."

And you can add in the statement about how when we are in no pain we have no need of pleasure.

BUT in response to those there are very many good arguments that those statements are contextual, and that life and pleasure are desirable, and those...



Cassius

December 4, 2024 at 7:52 PM

Rather than add this question to that thread, however, I think it's useful to consider this question separately because it does not just relate to natural vs necessary desires, it also requires us to consider explicitly the relationship between "mental" desires vs. "purely physical" desires.

(The state motto of New Hampshire, for those who aren't from the USA, is "Live Free or Die.")

How would Epicurus advise someone who was confronted with the choice that is contained in that slogan?

Let me say at the outset that I think a proper analysis of this question will consider the relationship between "physical" pleasures and "mental" pleasures. That's the way this relates to the "simple pleasures" question.

Some people will point out that it is very easy to obtain the natural and necessary "purely physical" desires which keep us alive, so we should not be concerned with "psychological desires" such as "being free,"

This is not an easy distinction to articulate, but one text that is potentially related is referenced by Torquatus in On Ends:

Quote from On Ends

XVII. The doctrine thus firmly established has corollaries which I will briefly expound.

(1) The Ends of Goods and Evils themselves, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake; where people go wrong is in not knowing what things are productive of pleasure and pain.

(2) Again, we aver that mental pleasures and pains arise out of bodily ones (and therefore I allow your contention that any Epicureans who think otherwise put themselves out of court; and I am aware that many do, though not those who can speak with authority); but although men do experience mental pleasure that is agreeable and mental pain that is annoying, yet both of these we assert arise out of and are based upon bodily sensations.

So with that as background, the question for discussion is: "How Would Epicurus Analyze The Slogan "Live Free Or Die"?" as an ethical guide?

Post by "Don" of December 4, 2024 at 11:28 PM

My first question is "How do you define someone who is 'living free'?"

Or even "What do you mean by 'free'?"

Do you mean living "free" politically? Should I imagine Mel Gibson's William Wallace yelling "Freedom!"

Do you mean living free from fear and anxiety?

I'm assuming New Hampshire would mean living free from the rule of a king. So, context is important so we don't impose meaning on top of theirs (for the moment!): [3:8 State Motto](#). - *The words "Live Free or Die," written by General John Stark, July 31, 1809, shall be the official motto of the state. Source. 1945, 152:1, eff. May 10, 1945.* So it became their motto in 1945 in the context, no doubt, of World War II.

The General John Stark in question penned what would become the motto as the postscript to a letter:

I shall remember, gentlemen, the respect you, and "the inhabitants of Bennington and its neighborhood" have shewn me, till I go to the country from which no traveller returns. I must soon receive marching orders.

JOHN STARK.

P. S. I will give you my volunteer toast.
**LIVE FREE OR DIE.—DEATH IS
NOT THE GREATEST OF EVILS.**

*Hon. Gideon Olin, Jonathan
Robinson, and David Fay.*

Green-Mountain Farmer, Bennington, Vermont, August 21, 1809

1809

Caption:

In 1809, John Stark was invited to an anniversary celebration for the Battle of Bennington. Unfortunately, he was too old and sick to travel. Instead he sent a letter to be read out loud at the celebration. He wrote about his great respect for the soldiers who fought with him for liberty and independence. At the end of the letter, Stark wrote, "Live free or die, death is not the greatest of evils." These words became an important symbol of New Hampshire and later, the state motto. Stark's original letter does not seem to have survived, but it was reprinted in this newspaper.

I find it very interesting that Stark included "death is not the greatest of evils." As we know, [death is nothing to us](#). I'll consider the Epicurean implications of this later. For now, that seems to me a fascinating little context for a deceptively simple motto.

Post by "Don" of December 4, 2024 at 11:54 PM

The two stark choices seems a bit limiting to me:

1. Live free
2. Die

Can I live pleasantly living under a dictator? Is there any room for finding pleasure? If so, don't die. But John Stark that penned "Live free or die, death is not the greatest of evils" also wrote in the same letter "As I was then, I am now — The friend of the equal rights of men, of representative Democracy, of Republicanism, and the Declaration of Independence, the great charter of our National rights — and of course the friend of the indissoluble union and constitution of the States. I am the enemy of all foreign influence, for all foreign influence is the influence of tyranny. This is the only chosen spot for liberty — this is the only Republic on earth."

So, we have to answer both Epicurus and John Stark.

In Stark's analysis, I am being asked to put my life on the line for a *cause*? Are there *causes* worth fighting and likely dying over?

Epicureans appear to have survived under absolute rulers (Macedonians, Persians, Romans), so my thought would be they had a different attitude to "equal rights of men, ...Democracy" etc. BUT we do know Epicureans fought to preserve the Republic of Rome (although that certainly didn't adhere to any sense of equality or Democracy).

My first blush response to [Cassius](#) 's question is that living - life itself - is paramount because it is the only way to pursue pleasure. Death is not to be sought (and I'm not even fully convinced that Epicurus allowed suicide, but that's another thread) when the potential for pleasure - even the smallest - is still possible.

It's not an easy question, and there are no simple answers - that's for sure.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 7:09 AM

Good points Don. And I think this begins the trip toward asking "under what circumstances -if any - do mental or emotional concerns (pains) outweigh what some would focus on the "simple pleasures that are almost always available to us."?

That's the challenge to articulate, I think, because while the wise man will (almost?) always have more reason for joy than for vacation, we will also sometimes die for a friend.

Reconciling those perspectives is doable I think but requires articulation as I think the question bothers significant numbers of people.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 7:12 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4177-how-would-epicurus-analyze-the-slogan-live-free-or-die-as-an-ethical-guide/>

As an aside I think it's a useful technique for learning Epicurean philosophy to offset against each other two or more reliable citations that on the surface seem to conflict with each other, and then explain how they can be reconciled.

Lots of issues can be addressed that way.

Post by “Don” of December 5, 2024 at 7:17 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That's the challenge to articulate, I think, because while the wise man will (almost?) always have more reason for joy than for vacation, we will also sometimes die for a friend.

LOL which is exactly why I skirted the challenge and didn't articulate any definitive response... At this time.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 10:42 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

didn't articulate any definitive response

Well I think this and most all other questions get resolved something like this:

1 - Because there are no supernatural forces or absolute forms to tell us otherwise, we've chosen to use the word "pleasure" as the ultimate term to describe all that is desirable in life, including all forms of desirable experience, mental or physical or any other adverb or adjective anyone would like to apply as a qualifier. The single word "Pleasure" includes them all.

2 - We should desire to continue to live so long as we can reasonably expect that the pleasurable experiences in our life will outweigh the experiences that are non-pleasurable (which means painful). This "calculation" is a totally subjective judgment in our own minds. We can make general statements about the way most people tend to think (most people tend to like vanilla ice cream) but no one has supernatural or absolute "moral" authority to make decisions for any other adult.

3 - You can argue about children and other edge cases but we're talking about adult responsible people in this analysis. That's why it is also important to acknowledge that from the Epicurean perspective all actions are not deterministic, and that it is proper for us to praise some things and blame others. You also have to consider the rules of society here, and what is illegal and legal, but no one should confuse the standard of "what society says is ok" with a standard of "right vs. wrong."

4 - Hard questions exist, such as cases where (1) we might choose not to intervene to save their lives, but if we did so we wouldn't forgive ourselves and thereafter suffer overriding mental pain, or (2) we face incurable highly painful disease or even pain from old age, or (3) any similar extreme situation where the outcomes are beyond our control, and the only option we have to stay alive would entail mental or physical torture that we don't think we could endure.

4 - In my view it seems pretty clear that the only way to make decision in cases such as listed in (3) is for we ourselves to make our best estimate of all of the consequences that each choice entails. Then we ourselves have to decide whether any future pleasures (of any kind) we might experience would be worth the expected pains (of any kind) that would come from our choice of action. There are no supernatural gods, no future reward or punishment, and no absolute rules which tell us what to decide - we have to make that decision ourselves.

I think that's the general rule Epicurus is setting out, and that's why alarm bells start going off in my mind whenever I hear anyone emphasize "tranquility" or "simple pleasures" --- or emphasize the reverse, "excitement" or "luxuries" -- that would override the general rule.

The general rule has to be clear or else there's no way to avoid confusion when we actually have to make these kinds of decisions.