

Epicurean Philosophy In Relation To Gulags and the Rack

Post by “Cassius” of April 26, 2025 at 2:25 PM

I saw the following posted recently, and the comment about gulags prompts me to use it as an exercise in talking about several ongoing issues. For easy of reading I've placed the original post in separate quote blocks, with my comments following each block. The original, of course, was a single post.

Quote

I'm currently studying Hellenistic philosophy so I've got a decent familiarity with epicureanism and stoicism. The stoics tended to really dislike epicurean ideas, especially the virtues being good for pleasure rather than for their own sake, but their ends look kind of similar in a lot of places if you ignore the semantics (eg am I removing desires because unfilled desires are painful and pain is bad, or because desire comes from the false belief that its object is good?). The idea of the Sage being happy on the rack is common to both philosophies.

I think it's important to emphasize that the Epicureans were not passive, and that the Epicureans were no less vigorous than the Stoics in denouncing their rival school, especially as to the relationship between virtue and pleasure. Both Torquatus in Cicero's "On Ends" and Diogenes of Oinoanda in the inscription on his wall strongly denounce the stoic viewpoint. Most importantly, the Stoics and Epicureans don't end up in the same place as to general removal of desires. Probably its fair to say that the Stoics were against all desire in general other than the desire for virtue, since the stoics held virtue is the only thing in life worth pursuing. But the Epicureans were far calling for the removal of all desires "in general." The only desires that were explicitly ruled out where those which are by nature impossible to fulfill and therefore by nature lead to more pain than pleasure. This paragraph seems to be presuming that all desire is inherently unfulfilled and therefore painful, and that's simply not true, at least from an Epicurean perspective. Epicurus held that life is desirable, and it's not correct to say that we find tomorrow painful, even though we desire to live it if we can do so with more pleasure than pain. As for "happiness," yes it appears that both schools said that it is possible to be "happy" even while on the wrack, but from an Epicurean perspective that doesn't mean that being on the rack is desirable. Stoics are likely to say that they are indifferent to the pain and claim that it should be disregarded for the sake of virtue, while an Epicurean is going to admit the pain, and even cry out in pain, and contemplation of "virtue" is going to be the furthest thing from

his mind at the time.

Quote

Yes, Epicurus believed that pleasure is the highest moral good. However, pleasure in the Epicurean view is freedom from pain. Anything else is just a variation of pleasures. Needing to have fancy meals or the like to be happy is antithetical to Epicureanism. You don't need to abstain from nice things, and having those memories is part of how an Epicurean copes with hard times, but you can't rely on them.

This formulation has numerous problems. Yes Epicureans identify “pleasure” as the highest good, but summarizing pleasure as “freedom from pain” with no further explanation leads to the error here of implying that “fancy meals or the like” are “just variations” and are not pleasures themselves and are “antithetical to Epicureanism.” It is correct to say that “needing” such pleasures is a problem, and it is correct to say that you should not “rely on them” when they are not available. But isn't it obvious that there's a problem with saying that “memories [of such pleasures] is part of how an Epicurean copes with hard times?” That sounds like we shouldn't be interested in eating tasty food, but it's ok to rely on *memories* of tasty food when times are hard. The basic problem here is that “freedom from pain” is made to sound like something different from pleasure, when in fact *everything* that is not painful is pleasurable when there are only two alternatives, and tasty food is as legitimate a part of the set of total pleasures as is poetry or literature or friendship or anything else. Epicureans don't narrow the definition of pleasure to an ambiguous state of “absence of XXX” - they expand the definition of pleasure to include all experiences of life that are desirable - and life itself is desirable, with the only undesirable experience falling under the name of “pain.”

Quote

In Epicureanism, death is nothing to us since our souls dissipate after leaving the body, so we can't suffer. Similarly, bodily pain is either brief or bearable. Thus we don't need to worry about either of those.

A causal reader of this paragraph might take away that this means that we don't have to worry about when we die or how we die, or when or how we experience pain. That would not be consistent with the thrust of the philosophy. We are always concerned about avoiding experiences involving unnecessary pain, meaning that we always avoid experiences and activities that we cannot justify as bringing us more pleasure in total than pain. The better way to say what is the target here is that we don't have to worry about anything happening to us after we die, and we don't have to worry about pain in life being unmanageable and impossible to escape. Pains that are long but not intense can be managed; pains which are intense and cannot be alleviated can be escaped by death. But there are many situations in life where you

don't want have to go through the process of making that calculation in real time, and "worrying" about those situations (meaning devoting your thoughts to how to act to avoid those situations) is perfectly appropriate.

Quote

An epicurean alleviates irrational fears of the unknown and of death or pain by understanding that they can't actually hurt them. It's pretty similar to how death to stoics is a dispreferred indifferent.

This statement has the same problem as the prior paragraph. Yes indeed pain can actually hurt us, and depending on the timing and how it occurs, the process of dying can hurt us too. The Epicurean is going identify and dismiss *irrational* fear of death and pain, but he will also devote all the vigor of mind and body that he can muster to avoiding the very many real dangers that can in fact bring death and pain.

Quote

From the perspective of an Epicurean, having good friends and forming memories with them means when you are suffering, those memories will be there to comfort you. If you are in a gulag, you can overcome your bodily suffering by thinking about your friends and your pleasant memories.

This sentence: "*If you are in a gulag, you can overcome your bodily suffering by thinking about your friends and your pleasant memories.*" is what motivated me to write this post.

Yes, if you wrap that last sentence in a lot of context and parse it carefully, there are certainly aspects of this that are true. But without that context and explanation, it's the worst kind of characterization of Epicurean philosophy.

First, "overcome" is not the correct word at all. The reference to being "in a gulag" epitomizes the modern "passive" approach to philosophy in general and Epicurus in particular. The entire purpose of Epicurean philosophy is to avoid "being in a gulag" in the first place, and if you approach everything in life from the point of view of "maybe I'll happen to find myself in XXXXX" then that's the best way to end up being there. As with Epicurus on his last day, you can offset mental pleasures against bodily pains, but those mental pleasures aren't going to make the bodily pains go away. Stoicism has planted in the minds of many people that it is in fact possible for the mind to override the real world - since nothing else matters to them but "virtue," it makes sense to say that pain is irrelevant, no matter how intense. That's what most people see as the insufferable arrogance and unreality of Stoicism. But the opposite of insufferable arrogance and unreality is not "I'm happy-go-lucky and I'll take whatever comes my way because I have a lot of stored up memories of ice cream and cake to offset against the tortures of the gulag."

Quote

TLDR In epicureanism, pleasure doesn't mean "I'm enjoying eating this caviar" it's freedom from pain and worry—ataraxia/tranquility is specifically about having no mental pain because that's easier to control. Epicureanism supposedly teaches you how to be free from mental pain even in the worst circumstances.

No doubt the “supposedly” is included here because the writer sees the weakness of his argument. Epicurean philosophy cannot teach you to be “free” from mental pain “even in the worst circumstances,” but that is the trap that people get into when they take “absence of pain” to be the real goal of Epicurean philosophy.

No one in real life is ever completely free from mental pain, and if we think Epicurus was realistic then that is not what he could have meant the “absence of pain” discussion to mean. When you get past superficial readings of the letter to Menoecus, there’s plenty of textual evidence that explains that Epicurus held there to be only two feelings, and that means - just as stated in Principal Doctrine 3, that when pain is absent then pleasure is present, and the reverse also.

While it is proper to state the “goal of life” in terms of absolute pleasure from which pain is absent, no person in real life is completely free of all mental and physical pain at any particular moment. And it hardly needs to be said that death (which is the only time when *all* pain is gone) is certainly not a pleasure.

The total elimination of all mental and physical pain from our lives is a very explicit and useful statement of the Epicurean goal. However Epicurus is nothing if not practical, and Epicurus does not make the perfect the enemy of the good. Every person’s circumstances are different, and because of those differences the highest and practical good cannot be stated more precisely and universally than maximum pleasure and minimum pain, or as Cicero stated in regard to Clodius, sarcastically but accurately, “nothing is preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.” (The Latin is “nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus.” Cicero, In defense Of Publius Sestius, 10.23)

Nothing can be better than a life full of pleasures combined with no disturbances of any kind, but for us this means that at times we will choose pain, when that choice avoids worse pain or brings more pleasure than pain. Epicurus would never have advised the choice of pain - even for a moment - if he had expected “absence of pain” to be applied rigidly or hyperlogically as the true goal of life. The true Epicurean goal is to do the best we can to achieve a happy life through the predominance of pleasure over pain. Identifying that properly and working to achieve it realistically requires both dismissing Stoic pretensions to “virtue” as well avoiding well-meaning but misguided attempts to reconcile Epicurus with Stoicism, Buddhism, and other philosophies of passivity and detachment.

Post by “Cassius” of April 27, 2025 at 7:33 PM

in relation to this topic we also have what Diogenes Laertius recorded about Epicurus' view of the wise man on the rack. i note that Yonge disagrees with Bailey and Hicks as to whether the wise man will cry out in pain (Yonge says that he will not; the other two say he will) but that all agree that the wise man is considered to be happy even while on the rack / under torture.

Quote

Laërtius, c. 222-235 κὰν στρεβλωθῆ δ' ὁ σοφός, εἶναι αὐτὸν εὐδαίμονα. μόνον τε χάριν ἔξειν τὸν σοφόν, καὶ ἐπὶ φίλοις καὶ παροῦσι καὶ ἀποῦσιν ὁμοίως διατε εὐλογοῦντα. ὅτε μέντοι στρεβλοῦται, ἔνθα καὶ μύζει καὶ οἰμώζει. γυναικί τ' οὐ μιγήσεσθαι τὸν σοφὸν ἢ οἱ νόμοι ἀπαγορεύουσιν, ὡς φησι Διογένης ἐν τῇ Ἐπιτομῇ τῶν Ἐπικούρου ἠθικῶν δογμάτων. ...

Yonge, 1853 That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally whether they are present or absent. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture.

Hicks, 1925 Even on the rack the wise man is happy. He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed. When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans.

Bailey, 1926 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.

I cite this because - not trying to flippant but to make a point -- i am not aware that anyone has good evidence that Epicurus had first-hand experience of being on the rack. We know that he was in extreme pain from kidney disease at the end of his life, but that's not the same as being under intentional torture, and yet Epicurus (or later Epicureans) none of whom we know to have been speaking from personal experience, took a strong position on the point.

I would cite this as additional evidence that Epicurus was motivated to speak "philosophically" about "absence of pain." My point in the first post was that the perfect is not the enemy of the good, and that the presence of some amount of pain, even a large amount, does not prevent an Epicurean from pronouncing himself "happy."

Epicurus would never have suggested that we regularly choose pain if a literal state of "total absence of pain" was required to be happy. Epicurus wasn't totally without pain on his last day, and a person on the rack is also not without pain, so there's something about the definition of the term "happy" from an Epicurean viewpoint that allows it to coexist with pain. And a "reduction to the absurd" interpretation of "absence of pain" therefore clearly cannot be what Epicurus was holding up as the practical goal of life from an Epicurean perspective.

Just like happiness can coexist with pain, the goal of life has to take into account that some degree of pain will be present, even chosen, unless we have literally advanced to the state of being totally in control of our circumstances, which no one we know of has yet achieved.

So to close again on my ultimate point, it appears to me that what Epicurus is doing is laying out an extremely practical goal that is also logically consistent. In a universe with no supernatural god and no absolute right and wrong there can be no single course of life that is "best" for everyone. Instead, the general way to state the goal is to take Nature's guidance - physical and mental pleasure and pain - and then do the best we can to make sure that our pleasures outweigh our pains as much as possible. Everyone is different, and for some of us that is indeed going to mean a life of predominantly physical pleasures.

But may of us think more deeply about how we only live for a short time and forever after cease to exist. Those people are going to remember (per Torquatus) that Epicurus held that mental experiences are often longer-lasting and more intense than physical ones. Those people are then going to make a personal assessment of what mental and physical activities bring them the most pleasure, and they will make their choices accordingly. And they will do everything they can to pursue that goal as vigorously as possible, regardless of what anyone tells them that "the gods" want or what "virtue" calls them to do.

Post by "Don" of April 27, 2025 at 9:08 PM

FWIW .. Here's my take on that...

[Epicurean Sage - Torture](#)

Hicks: Even on the rack the wise man is happy. Yonge: That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. It's important to...

sites.google.com

And please remember, it's not "happy happy joy joy" on the rack, the wise one is experiencing εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia), well-being. See numerous other threads on this forum where we've discussed, dissected, and dived down that eudaimonic rabbit hole.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 29, 2025 at 5:06 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The basic problem here is that “freedom from pain” is made to sound like something different from pleasure, when in fact everything that is not painful is pleasurable when there are only two alternatives, and tasty food is as legitimate a part of the set of total pleasures as is poetry or literature or friendship or anything else. Epicureans don’t narrow the definition of pleasure to an ambiguous state of “absence of XXX” - they expand the definition of pleasure to include all experiences of life that are desirable - and life itself is desirable, with the only undesirable experience falling under the name of “pain.”

[Quote from Cassius](#)

When you get past superficial readings of the letter to Menoeceus, there’s plenty of textual evidence that explains that Epicurus held there to be only two feelings, and that means - just as stated in Principal Doctrine 3, that when pain is absent then pleasure is present, and the reverse also.

This seems to me to point up what I consider to be the major error of the Cyrenaics (as articulated by Aristippus the Younger): that there is a third “neutral” condition that is neither pleasure nor pain. The Epicurean category of katastematic pleasure - in addition to the kinetic pleasures that seem to be the only ones the Cyrenaics recognized - corrects this error.

Post by “Cassius” of April 30, 2025 at 7:26 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

This seems to me to point up what I consider to be the major error of the Cyrenaics (as articulated by Aristippus the Younger): that there is a third “neutral” condition that is neither pleasure nor pain. The Epicurean category of katastematic pleasure - in addition to the kinetic pleasures that seem to be the only ones the Cyrenaics recognized - corrects this error.

Yep I agree that this was an error by the Cyreniacs. But there's a book to be written to explain exactly "why" this was an error. Were the Cyreniacs less human than everyone else and "felt"

things differently, or were they failing to make an intellectual point that Epicurus made later?

Further, I am not sure that it is correct to say that "katastematic" pleasure is what fills in the "neutral" gap. That would be an interesting question. While Don and I differ on the implications of katastematic pleasure, I am not sure that even Don would say that.

The relevant text from Diogenes Laertius 10-136 (Hicks) is:

Quote

He differs from the Cyrenaics with regard to pleasure. They do not include under the term the pleasure which is a state of rest, but only that which consists in motion. Epicurus admits both; also pleasure of mind as well as of body, as he states in his work On Choice and Avoidance and in that On the Ethical End, and in the first book of his work On Human Life and in the epistle to his philosopher friends in Mytilene. So also Diogenes in the seventeenth book of his Epilecta, and Metrodorus in his Timocrates, whose actual words are: "Thus pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of rest." The words of Epicurus in his work On Choice are: "Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity."

In relation to 10-34 Hicks:

Quote

Opinion they also call conception or assumption, and declare it to be true and false; for it is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence, and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by evidence. Hence the introduction of the phrase, "that which awaits" confirmation, e.g. to wait and get close to the tower and then learn what it looks like at close quarters. They affirm that there are two states of feeling, pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favourable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined; and that there are two kinds of inquiry, the one concerned with things, the other with nothing but words. So much, then, for his division and criterion in their main outline.

I can see how it would be easy to read these two together and say that rest vs motion fills in the gap. But DL also implies that the mind vs body distinction is relevant. (Did the Cyreniacs exclude the mind from pleasure?) And I don't think it's logically necessary that adding "states of rest" to "states of motion" thereby rules out any other kind of pleasure. And to me the implication of "there are only two feelings" does not equate to "Yes, and those two categories

are "Pleasure of rest" and "Pleasure of Motion." At the very least one might equally say "Yes, and those two categories are Pleasures of the Mind and Pleasures of the Body." And there are probably other ways of subdividing pleasure up as well.

Not trying to pick nits here, but as this subject is so important, we want to be sure that we are not projecting our own views so as to miss other implications.

Post by "Cassius" of April 30, 2025 at 7:42 AM

In reading further today I see this post by [Al-Hakiim von Grof](#)

Post

[RE: The "Absence of Pain" Problem](#)

[...]

At the potential risk of repeating concepts already shared in this thread I'll take a stab at explaining my understanding. What follows is just *opinion* based on my understanding of Epicurus and lived experience.

To answer your question directly: absolutely. Not stubbing one's toe is pleasurable. Not just in the nervous "rush" and laughter that happens after a near miss or just in the idea of not stubbing one's toe, or recalling a stubbed toe's pain and therefore being grateful for...



Al-Hakiim von Grof

April 29, 2025 at 9:41 PM

What he describes there is the way I would interpret "there are two feelings, pleasure and pain." The default state of life is pleasure (of all kinds and manners of description). Whenever there is any deviation from that state of pleasure, that deviation (of all kinds and manners of description) deserves the name of "pain."

That's the only logically rigorous way I can interpret "there are two feelings, pleasure and pain." Any attempt to subdivide the pleasures and the pains is going to require some kind of further intellectual analysis that may at times be helpful but may equally lead to all kinds of rabbit holes that take the focus off of the fact that we should ultimately look to Nature to tell us what pleasure is, not to gods or to ideal forms.

Post by “Pacatus” of April 30, 2025 at 1:46 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Not trying to pick nits here

I didn't notice any nits ... 😄