

Some Epicurean conclusions

Post by “Stan85” of May 19, 2018 at 7:23 PM

I'm not an expert, but it seems obvious to me that these ethical conclusions follow from Epicurean principles:

1. Being absolutely mortal, I have no stake in the future.
2. I owe the world (or "humanity") nothing, and I am owed nothing by the world (or "humanity") in return.
3. Duty is always ultimately self-chosen.

These propositions are liberating, but also somewhat unsettling, disorienting--perhaps the opposite of what a livable ethics should be! Though I count myself an admirer of Epicurus, unlike others I find his philosophy deeply pessimistic. To me Epicureans are like a shipwrecked crew who wound up on an island with limited food and no hope to be rescued. They know they are going to die, but make the most of their situation. They enjoy each other's company and conversation, play games, and devise various means to divert themselves while the supplies run out. Is this not the Epicurean view of the world? I am **not** saying that it is false, only that it is not a bright and cheerful one.

Post by “Cassius” of May 19, 2018 at 9:37 PM

Stan85 I think you raise great questions, but as you would expect I see the answers differently. Out of curiosity, how old are you (generally) and what is your religious background?

I am almost 60, and was raised mainline/conservative protestant in the USA.

I ask because of course while I agree with you about the unsettling nature of the Epicurean view, I think a lot depends on one's background and how long they have been under the influence of religious or humanist worldviews that focus on god and universal morality. I think that over time and after study it begins to sink in that the craving for immortality is just not realistic, and that we aren't fundamentally different than all the pet dogs and cats and other animals that we get so attached to in life, but have to leave so frequently behind as they pass away faster than us. Of course that's only one minor aspect of the big picture, and I disagree

with the "we are ants in an infinite cosmos argument" that wants us to view ourselves as totally insignificant. These issues seem to rotate around getting a grip on the meaning of "significant" and the meaning of "meaningfulness" and "knowledge" and what is reasonable to expect out of life and what is unreasonable. I am sure there are many different perspectives on how best to do that, depending on individual background, but ultimately a commitment to "truth" rather than to "wishful thinking" about how to spend our lives.

All of these are just preliminary comments but what you have raised will hopefully spur a much longer discussion over time.

Post by “Hiram” of May 20, 2018 at 2:23 PM

[Quote from Stan85](#)

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It's the exact opposite. In [Vatican Saying 48](#), the founders of this School said:

While we are on the road, we must try to make what is before us better than what is past; when we come to the road's end, we feel a smooth contentment.

And Norman DeWitt said: "the unplanned life is not worth living". We plan for our future LIFE to sculpt it as one that is filled with pleasures, not for a posited afterlife.

As for death, the most complete summary of the ethical repercussions of our teachings was given by Philodemus, and I comment on them here:

<http://societyofepicurus.com/reasonings-abo...demus-on-death/>

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2018 at 4:55 PM

I started to comment too Hiram on the part about "stake in the future." If I recall correctly isn't this touched on in the Diogenes of Oinoanda inscription, where there is discussion of the pleasure we get today thinking about how how actions today will work out positively in the future. You aren't there to experience it yourself, but the anticipated future can still have a major impact on your life today.

Post by "Hiram" of May 23, 2018 at 9:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I think that's here:

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2017/03/25/dio...-the-pleasures/>

Quote

Fragment 33:

Well now, I want to deflect also the error that ... further inflates your doctrine as ignorant. The error is this: **[not] all causes in things precede their effects, even if the majority do, but some of them precede their effects, others [coincide with] them, and others follow them.**

Examples of causes that precede are cautery and surgery saving life: in these cases extreme pain must be borne, and it is after this that pleasure quickly follows.

Examples of coincident causes are [solid] and liquid nourishment and, in addition to these, [sexual acts:] we do not eat [food] and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we drink wine and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we emit semen and experience pleasure afterwards; rather the action brings about these pleasures for us immediately, without awaiting the future.

[As for causes that follow, an example is expecting] to win praise after death: although men experience pleasure now because there will be a favourable memory of them after they have gone, nevertheless the cause of the pleasure occurs later.

Now you, being unable to mark off these distinctions, and being unaware that **the**

virtues have a place among the causes that coincide with their effects (for they are borne along with [pleasure], go completely astray.)

Post by “Cassius” of May 23, 2018 at 10:22 AM

Yes that's the source - thanks!

Post by “Stan85” of May 24, 2018 at 9:39 PM

Thank you for your thoughts. I was not familiar with the text of Diogenes of Oenoanda quoted above. The idea of present pleasure caused by future anticipation is one I've come across before, but I didn't know its origin. The text also renders the dictum that "virtue is its own reward" in an Epicurean color. It reminds me of a passage in a book by E.T. Jaynes, a physicist who made contributions to probability theory, where he is concerned to separate *physical* causality from *logical* causality. Come to think of it, was this not one of the major points of criticism that Carneades and his followers leveled at the Stoics and their notion of divine *logos*? I don't remember the details of their criticism, but it would seem that confusing the two concepts is so natural that it would take a genius to discern the distinction for the first time.

I wasn't raised in any religious tradition and my parents were agnostics with no religious affiliation, but I consider myself a reluctant atheist or agnostic. I suspect that William James (another reluctant agnostic) was right that immortality is a natural human need. To me the doctrine that we have a stake in what happens long after we are gone inasmuch as we derive pleasure from contemplating our posthumous reputation, or "the good that we shall leave behind us," has something of the character of a perpetual motion machine once you've removed any conception of good beyond pleasure itself.

But be it as it may, I think my difficulty with the Epicurean treatment of mortality is only a consequence of a more general difficulty in Epicurean ethics. We voluntarily endure present pain and hardship in order to attain future goods: some kind of achievement, the mastery of an art or a field of knowledge, or reputation, or wealth, a trophy wife, the safety of the state--what not. So far not only will the Epicureans agree with me, they'll remind me that, far from giving unalloyed pain, the struggles and the toils on the way to attaining future goods are themselves considerable sources of pleasure; some would say that they are the sources of *the greatest* pleasure that we ever experience. So far we're in complete agreement. But let me bring

forward a psychological observation. Take the list of good things that were just mentioned. Ordinary common sense would classify some of the things on that list (knowledge, safety) as things that are *good in themselves*, others, like a trophy wife, as avenues to pleasure and little more. Now I don't think I'd be mistaken to remark that, as a matter of fact, we reap much greater pleasure when we work toward those things that we see as *inherently good* rather than as means. Indeed, we would experience *hardly any pleasure at all* when working for something that we see as *nothing but a means to pleasure*. But of course, unlike common sense, Epicureanism sees pleasure as the sole good, the one principle by which the goodness of things is to be judged. Therefore, as a matter of psychology, a consistent Epicurean could not find pleasure in work, in any kind of sacrifice of the present for the future. Ironically, he is cut off from the most common, the most easily accessible fountain of pleasure in human life.

Thank you for taking the time to read my ramblings. I'll be interested to hear your thoughts.

Post by "Cassius" of May 25, 2018 at 4:38 AM

I think you are correctly putting your finger on the area of disagreement: Your view is that "Ordinary common sense would classify some of the things on that list (knowledge, safety) as things that are *good in themselves*, "

Epicurus disagreed with that, as you recognize: "But of course, unlike common sense, Epicureanism sees pleasure as the sole good, the one principle by which the goodness of things is to be judged"

As you also write, this is one key: "Therefore, as a matter of psychology, a consistent Epicurean could not find pleasure in work." And of course this is the disagreement: " Ironically, he is cut off from the most common, the most easily accessible fountain of pleasure in human life."

I think one reason I am so personally convinced of the correctness of Epicurus' position is that I believe it to be above all realistic about what is possible. Life is desirable even though it requires effort- it means taking in the big picture and realizing that work is the price we pay for pleasure, and that even though pain and pleasure are separate feelings, we do chew gum and walk at the same time - we experience many pleasures at the same time we are exerting ourselves, just like Epicurus experienced many pleasures on his last day, even while in great pain. If we could be gods and experience nothing but pleasures continuously while also experiencing no pain, we would choose to do so, but we are not, so we choose the best available to us, and we savor the pleasure in that.

So when you say: "Therefore, as a matter of psychology, a consistent Epicurean could not find pleasure in work, in any kind of sacrifice of the present for the future. " Are you not simply observing that pain is undesirable?