

An August 2018 Example of the Ascetic View of Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2018 at 6:42 AM

My guess is that of every ten new articles you see on Epicurus, eight of them are going to leave a totally false impression of what Epicurus really taught, such as this one, which makes Epicurus sound like an ascetic competing with stoics and monks to see how many desires he could suppress. And as usual the inaccurate conclusions can be traced back to the single misunderstanding -- the "BUT....." --- that seems to impress ascetics most: "'Epicurus's version agrees that pleasure is the greatest good and the best life is the most pleasant life,'" says James Warren, professor of Classics at Cambridge University. "But he thinks the highest pleasure you can achieve is the absence of pain. Once pain has been removed, you don't increase pleasure from that point on, you just vary it."

Thus the standard way of misrepresenting Epicurus that leads to his embrace by the ascetics and his dismissal by those who have the intelligence to see that this formulation cannot be what Epicurus really taught:

"Pleasure IS the goal of life, but Pleasure ISN'T what you think it is! Pleasure is really a zero!"

On the contrary, what Epicurus taught is that pleasure IS what you (the person uncorrupted by a false philosophy like asceticism) think it is, because you FEEL it and need no academic expert to interpret it for you!

From De Finibus: "This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them."

<https://qz.com/1356786/hedoni...sons-you-think/>



Post by “Cassius” of August 19, 2018 at 9:40 AM

Someone asked about the Cyreniatics and my view is:

Diogenes Laertius thought this was the most significant difference, which sounds likely. Key points are that Epicurus endorses BOTH pleasures of the mind and those of the body, which the Cyreniatics only endorsed those of the body, and Epicurus held that pleasures of the mind can be greater than those of the body, while the Cyreniatics apparently held a different view: "Such are his {Epicurus'} views on life and conduct; and he has discoursed upon them at greater length elsewhere. 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."

He further disagrees with the Cyrenaics in that they hold that pains of body are worse than mental pains; at all events evil-doers are made to suffer bodily punishment; whereas

Epicurus holds the pains of the mind to be the worse; at any rate the flesh endures the storms of the present alone, the mind those of the past and future as well as the present. In this way also he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body."

<http://www.epicurus.net/en/lives.html#F>

I can see room for reasonable discussion between Cyreniacs and Epicureans as to which pleasures are more intense, as I think that is going to differ with individual context - at least our choices among them will. I can also see reasonable argument about the meaning of pleasures at "rest" for reasons we have discussed many times - any discussion of that turns on definitions of what pleasures of "rest" really are, and from the point of view of life being dynamic and ever-changing, nothing is really "at rest." But these are issues among friends who see the bigger and deeper points - that there are no religious gods or ideal forms of conventional philosophy which tell us what pleasure is, or that we should pursue something other than pleasure.

Post by "C. Florius Lupus" of January 25, 2019 at 5:49 PM

PD 15: "The natural desires are easily obtained and satisfied, but the unnatural desires can never be satisfied."

For me the question of pleasure is mostly a question of efficiency. Since our resources are limited, we have to manage them wisely. We should not waste them on things of low importance like excessive luxury, but on things that really matter to us, i.e. we have to keep focused.

Sometimes possessions cause more worries to us than actual enjoyment. This is when asceticism gives more pleasure than unrestrained desire for luxuries.

Post by "Cassius" of January 25, 2019 at 6:25 PM

"Sometimes possessions cause more worries to us than actual enjoyment." << There's absolutely no doubt about that, and I've definitely seen that in my own life too. But I would be cautious about ever referring to asceticism as any more desirable than extravagance, per VS 63, which would appear to link the two as exactly analogous errors: "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."

And it's my observation that if we consider pleasure as widely as we should in terms of all emotional enjoyment rather than just money and things, that people today more frequently settle for LESS than they should, rather than seeking too much pleasure.

We're very together on the perils of money and the things money can buy, but I firmly believe

(as I expect you probably agree) that the analysis of seeking pleasure goes much further than money, and to limit the Epicurean analysis to a criticism of commercialism is a vast underselling off the philosophy.

And internet discussion of Epicurus the proponents of asceticism outnumber the proponents of a full view of pleasure by a factor of about 1000 to one.

Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of January 26, 2019 at 5:24 PM

Even Stoic philosophers like Seneca warn against asceticism:

Seneca: *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium V*

Quote

[I] *Illud autem te admoneo, ne eorum more qui non proficere sed conspici cupiunt facias aliqua quae in habitu tuo aut genere vitae notabilia sint; [II] asperum cultum et intonsum caput et neglegentiolem barbam et **indictum argento odium** et cubile humi positum et quidquid aliud ambitionem perversa via sequitur evita. Satis ipsum nomen philosophiae, etiam si modeste tractetur, invidiosum est: quid si nos hominum consuetudini coeperimus excerpere? Intus omnia dissimilia sint, frons populo nostra conveniat. [III] Non splendeat toga, ne sordeat quidem; non habeamus argentum in quod solidi auri caelatura descenderit, **sed non putemus frugalitatis indicium auro argentoque caruisse**. Id agamus ut meliorem vitam sequamur quam vulgus, non ut contrariam....*

"[1].... I warn you, however, not to act after the fashion of those who desire to be conspicuous rather than to improve, by doing things which will rouse comment as regards your dress or general way of living. [2] Repellent attire, unkempt hair, slovenly beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth, and any other perverted forms of self-display, are to be avoided. The mere name of philosophy, however quietly pursued, is an object of sufficient scorn; and what would happen if we should begin to separate ourselves from the customs of our fellow-men? Inwardly, we ought to be different in all respects, but our exterior should conform to society. [3] Do not wear too fine, nor yet too frowzy, a toga. One needs no silver plate, encrusted and embossed in solid gold; but we should not believe the lack of silver and gold to be proof of the simple life. Let us try to maintain a higher standard of life than that of the multitude, but not a contrary standard...."

I am surprised that there are so many proponents of asceticism among Epicureans. The stereotype is that Epicureans were unrestrained hedonists and Stoics ascetics. Neither is probably true, instead their lifestyle seemed to have been similar. The actual hedonists were the Cyrenaics and the ascetics were the Cynics.

What Epicurus taught was ... well... common sense.

The luxury that we can afford depends on our resources. And in their use we have to set priorities. At the same time we have to take care that an excess of pleasure does not endanger our wellbeing (health, reputation, friendships). "ΜΗΔΕΝ ΑΓΑΝ" (nothing in excess) - a Delphic motto and the golden mean, which is also central to Aristotle's ethics.

Yes, the concept of pleasure goes beyond money. And the difficulty is often to find out what exactly it is that gives the most pleasure. Many go wrong here, so they set the wrong priorities in life. I am not even sure, if I have found it for myself.

Post by “Martin” of January 26, 2019 at 10:25 PM

I agree except for the golden mean. It is OK as a guidance for many things, and hedonic calculus often results in moderation. However, I attribute some of my greatest pleasures and successes, which in turn enabled further pleasures, to go full throttle into mostly beneficial obsessions for extended periods despite some pains which I incurred. I do not recall anything from Epicurus which would advocate the golden mean as a standard.

Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2019 at 11:59 AM

Great post Florius, and I also agree with Martin's point. "Common sense" gets thrown around too easily, but it does indeed seem to me to be "common sense" that "moderation" as an inflexible rule is as obviously subject to exceptions as any other inflexible rule.

Every time I think about this issue I can't get out of my mind the Barry Goldwater line:

"Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice, moderation in pursuit of justice no virtue."

That line sounds (sounded) so smooth, and in some circumstances probably does ring true, and yet there are so many issues with it!