

An Epicurean "Sanity Check"

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2019 at 11:55 PM

Let's perform a "sanity check" on the thought process of a young Epicurean raised in an Epicurean community:

(1) As soon as I am old enough to recognize the world around me, I see and feel that I, like all other animals, have a strong desire to experience pleasures of all kinds, both immediate and long term;

(2) As I grow older and stronger I see that I can experience numerous and vivid pleasures, and that virtually all of them can be experienced with little or very reasonable payment in pain if I simply use a moderate amount of intelligence. I also learn that I can be confident in facing pain because even if I make a mistake, pain will be manageable if long and short if intense;

(3) As I study my lessons I learn that the feelings I have had from birth are correct, and that in fact in a basic sense only mental and physical pleasure and pain have any real motivating influence on me, and I understand that every moment of my life will ultimately be motivated by pleasure or pain;

(4) As I study my lessons I become fully convinced that there is no god to reward me for willingly accepting pain, and no ideal forms which require me to accept pain in order to live "nobly," as if for some goal which is to me nothing but an abstraction;

(5) As I study further and see people and animals around me die from a variety of causes, I fully accept that the same thing is going to happen to me, and I embrace the knowledge that in the eternity of space and time, I will be conscious and alive for at best a handful of decades, which will seem to go by in an instant;

(6) As I see my friends and parents grow old, and as I study the lessons of my teachers, I no longer doubt that death is literally the absence of feeling, and I know that when I am dead I will never again experience any pleasures of any kind.

(7) So now that I am graduated from my Epicurean education, in the prime of my mental and physical strength of young adulthood, I commit myself to spending the rest of my life in as simple a manner as possible, on bread and water, with a little cheese, as quietly and passively and in as much isolation as I can find - perhaps with a friend or two - but with all of us forswearing any desire for marriage, children, sex, music, art, or ambition to improve ourselves or our community! And if the Persians invade our city, we will hide or surrender, because fighting would certainly disturb our bodies and minds.

Items one through six are clearly documented, uncontradicted by any Epicurean text, and internally consistent with everything known about Epicurean views of the science of nature and of knowledge.

But what about item seven?

Post by “Ron” of February 3, 2019 at 12:25 AM

No, not attested as far as I know. But the opposites are not much promoted, either, as far as I know, suggesting that such matters either are not of huge importance, are merely matters of personal taste, or that the prevailing culture, perhaps like that at Athens, already assures that one will be a participant in such activities so there is no need to promote them.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2019 at 7:32 AM

Eilli wrote:

[Cassius](#) I totally agree of what you said above, and I would like to add some words in this : "if the Persians invade our city"... Imo this is not the real danger if some people want to invade our city... No, the real danger is when WE that live in our city IF we live like strangers already, and if we see and feel our country as a disgusting, miserable and strange issue separated from ourselves already. If we are not living in pleasure in our country, and we live like miserales already. If we see our neighbors with jealousy and in vengeance already, so then whatever miserable thing would happen to us, it is just an addition to our misery. This is the whole issue, I suppose. If we have and feel the NOTHING, we prefer to lose EVERYTHING.

And here is how right Pericles (through the historian Thucidides) points out it in his Epitaph.

<<The freedom that we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes. Yet freedom in our private lives does not make us lawless as citizens. We obey and respect our legislators and our laws, particularly those that protect the injured, whether these laws are actually on the statute books, or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace.

Our city also provides means for the mind to refresh itself from labor. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our homes and businesses forms a daily source of pleasure. Our city draws the produce of the world into our harbor, so that to Athenians the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of their own.

If we turn to our military policy, there also we differ from our antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality. In education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after military manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger>>.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2019 at 7:32 AM

Elli (and others) - you say that you agree with what I said above, but what did I say? I just lined up six categories of teachings that are clear from the ancient Epicurean texts, and then I added the conclusions that modern commentators tell us the young Epicurean would reach. Do you think I am projecting that there could be an inconsistency that might lead someone to question the sanity of either the ancients or the commentators? Tsk, tsk, I am just stating what 95% of people in 2019 who have heard of Epicurus think about what he taught! Do you think I would suggest that a reexamination might be in order? That would disturb my tranquility! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2019 at 7:35 AM

[Quote from Ron](#)

No, not attested as far as I know. But the opposites are not much promoted, either, as far as I know, suggesting that such matters either are not of huge importance, are merely matters of personal taste, or that the prevailing culture, perhaps like that at Athens, already assures that one will be a participant in such activities so there is no need to promote them.

I'm not sure I follow your comment, Ron. "such matters are not of huge importance." To which "such matters" are you referring, and as being matters of "personal taste"?

Post by “Ron” of February 3, 2019 at 4:14 PM

“...spending the rest of my life in as simple a manner as possible, on bread and water, with a little cheese, as quietly and passively and in as much isolation as I can find - perhaps with a friend or two - but with all of us forswearing any desire for marriage, children, sex, music, art, or ambition to improve ourselves or our community! And if the Persians invade our city, we will hide or surrender,...”

Post by “Cassius” of February 4, 2019 at 8:27 AM

(Updating the thread with a further response slightly modified from what I posted on FB)

I am sorry if anyone did not detect my sarcasm. My point in writing in this way was to illustrate what I think is the total incompatibility of point seven (the modern consensus) with the first six premises (the clearly-documented record). Sarcasm is a perilous pursuit but I sometimes engage in it when I think it is more important for people to think through the result for themselves than to agree (or disagree) with me.

It is never my intent to mislead anyone in what I really think, but at times I think there is no way to raise a point adequately without attempting to illustrate absurdity. Of course i do not think that most people who think number seven are themselves absurd, because this is what is taught every time Epicurus is mentioned today.

I think you are quite right however with this comment: "We have though to take into consideration the hardships under which people living at that time." However I would refocus that and point to the hardships that WE live under today, indoctrinated from the cradle with absurd religious and "humanist" and "Stoic" ethics which have dominated the world for 2000 years now. That's the reason I think there is probably no way to reconstruct what the Epicureans really thought without putting ourselves in the place of someone young, who is yet uncorrupted, and stepping them through the education process. Given what we know of Epicurean teachings about nature and epistemology it is my view that there is no way that they ended up thinking number seven themselves. Number seven is the result of two thousand years of corruption, in my view. It is held by many good people, but I believe it to be incorrect, nevertheless.

I see we have varying reactions to my post so perhaps it will achieve my goal of causing people to think about this.

Post by “Matt” of February 4, 2019 at 8:36 AM

What do you really think number 7 should add up to? It’s true the first 6 do not add up to 7, but what would 7 actually be?

“So now that I am graduated from my Epicurean education, in the prime of my mental and physical strength of young adulthood....(blank).”

Post by “Cassius” of February 4, 2019 at 8:43 AM

[Elayne](#) posted this on FB and I think it is a good start:

"Yeah, 7 doesn't make a lick of sense. How about this version of 7:

"So now that I am graduated from my Epicurean education, in the prime of my mental and physical strength of young adulthood, I commit myself to spending the rest of my life paying attention to how the particular actions and circumstances that please me change over time, adjusting my life as necessary to maximize my pleasures, instead of getting fixated on a single regimen which could lose relevance. I will savor my food in the company of friends, whether we have bread and water or a feast. I will avoid those who seek to cause me pain and gather around me those like-minded friends who seek to celebrate happiness together. Together, we will take steps to secure our present and future life of pleasures and share what we learn with each other. And if those who would cause us pain invade our city, we will thoughtfully make decisions to flee, hide, fight or befriend, depending on our best estimates of how this choice will impact our future ability to enjoy life."

Post by “Cassius” of February 4, 2019 at 9:02 AM

I was asked on EF how I would rewrite 7 myself. I think what Elayne wrote here "adjusting my life as necessary to maximize my pleasures," is particularly important.

I need to sit down and write out a paragraph like that myself, but the key point I think is that when we knew we have limited time, and we know that life is short, and if we are confident that there is no afterlife, then that knowledge would impel anyone to pack as much into this lifetime as possible. Of course it's still a good question as to what "packing as much into this lifetime as possible" should mean, but the bottom line is that there is no time to waste, and selecting any particular lifestyle had better be based on expecting it to bring the most net pleasure. We can debate whether "simplicity" is the key to that or not, and I don't think that will always be the case by any means, which is why I think Epicurus stated explicitly in [VS63](#) that "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."

I am sure that there is a lot of individual preference involved in what makes us the happiest as individuals. But I just personally recoil in horror at the suggestion that "live to the maximum net pleasure" equates to "live the simplest life possible."

And probably i should say further that I recall not only in horror, but in absolute flabbergasted amazement, then horror, then what I believe to be righteous anger at what I perceive to be a hijacking of Epicurean philosophy by its worst enemy - the ascetic- enemy-of-the-human-race mindset! 😊

Post by “Matt” of February 4, 2019 at 9:50 AM

I agree with what both you said. Elayne’s response is quite good. It’s tempered and definitely reasonable. Yes, I would be interested in your response when you get time to add it all up.

Post by “Matt” of February 4, 2019 at 10:04 AM

So my only thought is this in regard to solitude, isolation and ascetic practice.

Even if Epicurus did not endorse this behavior, there will always be a type of person who, no matter what philosophy or religion, will attempt to be alone and away from the crowd.

I think there can come a point when a (certain type) of person can reach the summit of their practice and find themselves already intellectually isolated and alone even in the crowd. They may choose to stay in solitude among the crowd and try to teach those around them, or conversely they go into isolation away from the crowd to live their life in peace.

But it's a totally different idea than prescribed asceticism or hermitage. This is just like water seeking its lowest point, the wisest become separated mentally from the crowd whether they choose to or not. The only choice is to stay and cultivate those around them or cut and run to sanctuary.

Post by "Cassius" of February 4, 2019 at 4:31 PM

(1) Yes LD but is it inherently impossible to create any kind of society with significant numbers of people who are relatively intelligent and thoughtful? I don't see that that is naturally impossible, though it seems so at times. I would think that while utopias of perfection are probably out of reach, it ought to be possible to improve education and societal structure so that all wise men don't inherently have to run from any gathering of more than a handful of people.

(2) But i do think that the most central issue of all is the issue of "knowing that our time is short, how do we spend it. I am no fan of country music, but my answer would be close to the lyrics of the Tim McGraw song -- and I have to believe that Epicurus would endorse that too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjRXGqRofE4>

The only issue I have with the lyrics from an Epicurean perspective is that "the good book" would be the letters of Epicurus and the poem of Lucretius!

He said I was in my early forties, with a lot of life before me

And one moment came that stopped me on a dime

I spent most of the next days, looking at the x-rays

Talking bout' the options and talking bout' sweet times.

I asked him when it sank in, that this might really be the real end

How's it hit 'cha when you get that kind of news?

Man what did ya do?

He said

I went skydiving

I went rocky mountain climbing

I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu

And I loved deeper

And I spoke sweeter

And I gave forgiveness I'd been denyin'

And he said some day I hope you get the chance

To live like you were dyin'

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He said I was finally the husband, that most the time I wasn't

And I became a friend, a friend would like to have

And all of a sudden goin' fishin, wasn't such an imposition

And I went three times that year I lost my dad

Well I finally read the good book, and I took a good long hard look

At what I'd do if I could do it all again

And then

I went skydiving

I went rocky mountain climbing

I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Shu

And I loved deeper

And I spoke sweeter

And I gave forgiveness I'd been denyin'

And he said some day I hope you get the chance

To live like you were dyin'

Like tomorrow was the end

And ya got eternity to think about what to do with it

What should you do with it

What can I do with it

What would I do with it

Skydiving

I went rocky mountain climbing

I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu

And man I loved deeper

And I spoke sweeter

And I watched an eagle as it was flyin'

And he said some day I hope you get the chance

To live like you were dyin'

To live like you were dyin'

To live like you were dyin'

To live like you were dyin'

To live like you were dyin'

Post by “Matt” of February 5, 2019 at 7:58 AM

In regard to the invading *Persians*, can we assume they are an allegorical generic population with an alien philosophy and traditions invading the city of modern times?

I mean this allegory is also meant for modern times too correct?

Not just the historical Persians under Xerxes I? 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 5, 2019 at 8:20 AM

That was my intent, right!

But it's interesting to see how times change. Since I tend to take the side of underdogs, and it seems most all the world hates modern Persia (and Syria, and Venezuela) - maybe a modern Persian invasion would be more welcome than in 300 BC. 😊