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Epicurus and Ethics

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In this lecture we discuss the ethics of Epicurus, an Ancient Greek philosopher who ascribed to hedonism and claimed that pleasure is the greatest good in life.

00:00

Epicurus and ethics in this lecture we

00:03

will discuss the ethics of Epicurus an

00:06

ancient philosopher born in 341 BC and

00:09

founder of the influential school of

00:11

philosophy known as epicureanism before

00:15

delving into Epicurus his ethics it will

00:17

be helpful to clarify exactly what

00:19

ethics is and the questions it tries to

00:22

answer ethics is a branch of philosophy

00:25

whose main subject matter is the

00:28

examination of moral values and value

00:30

judgments judgments concerning what is

00:33

good or bad or judgments about what

00:35

morally ought or ought not to be since

00:38

we naturally attempt to strive for what

00:40

is good and flee from what is bad ethics

00:43

is concerned with questions of how one

00:45

ought to behave or how one ought to live

00:48

their life thus ethics is said to be

00:51  
concerned with normative statements  
00:53  
which are statements about how things  
00:55  
should be as opposed to statements of  
00:57  
how things are which are called factual  
01:00  
or existential statements two major  
01:03  
questions which ethics deals with and  
01:05  
which Epicurus himself was specifically  
01:08  
concerned with are what is the ultimate  
01:10  
good in life and relatedly how should  
01:13  
one behave in order to obtain this good  
01:15  
and hence lead the best life possible  
01:18  
throughout history there have been a  
01:20  
large variety of answers to the question  
01:23  
what is the ultimate good for human  
01:24  
beings but three answers have been  
01:27  
especially prominent some philosophers  
01:29  
have responded that virtue is the  
01:31  
ultimate good some have said happiness  
01:33  
and some have claimed that pleasure is  
01:36  
the ultimate good we must strive after  
01:39  
Epicurus is perhaps the most famous  
01:41  
proponent of the third answer in this  
01:44  
lecture we will discuss his ideas  
01:45  
regarding pleasure and his thoughts

01:47  
about what we must do in order to live  
01:49  
the most pleasurable life possible the  
01:53  
view that pleasure is the greatest of  
01:55  
all goods is called hedonism while there  
01:58  
have been many philosophers who have  
01:59  
ascribed to this view as Richard Taylor  
02:02  
points out in his book good and evil  
02:04  
hedonism appears to be the default  
02:06  
position which most non philosophers  
02:09  
ascribe to of all the things that have  
02:12  
ever been proposed  
02:13  
as the unique and greatest good perhaps  
02:16  
none has won more adherents than  
02:18  
pleasure feelings of pleasure it would  
02:20  
seem are always good and they're  
02:23  
opposite feelings of pain are always bad  
02:25  
one need not be a philosopher to arrive  
02:27  
at this opinion and it is perhaps for  
02:30  
this reason that the everyday philosophy  
02:32  
of vast numbers of people is the  
02:35  
philosophy of hedonism when most people  
02:38  
think of hedonism they think of the form  
02:40  
of hedonism ascribed to by the serenade  
02:43  
philosophers of ancient Greece the

02:45  
sarony ex who were roughly  
02:47  
contemporaries of Epicurus in the 4th  
02:49  
century BC thought that the best life  
02:52  
was the life filled with the most  
02:53  
pleasure they identified the bodily  
02:56  
pleasures namely the pleasures we  
02:58  
obtained from food wine and sexual  
03:00  
gratification as the most intense of all  
03:03  
pleasures and thought that each moment  
03:06  
we should try to maximize these  
03:07  
pleasures to the greatest degree  
03:09  
possible  
03:11  
Epicurus as hedonism was a far cry from  
03:14  
that of the ceranae ex he readily agreed  
03:17  
that the most intense pleasures are  
03:19  
indeed the bodily pleasures however he  
03:22  
thought that over indulging in such  
03:24  
pleasures was not necessary for the  
03:26  
attainment of the good life and in fact  
03:28  
prevented one from attaining a  
03:30  
pleasurable life bodily pleasures he  
03:33  
reasoned are not only of short duration  
03:35  
ending almost as soon as they have begun  
03:38  
but more importantly they are often

03:40  
followed by intense pain the pleasure of  
03:44  
being drunk may be great in the moment  
03:46  
for example but the pain of a horrible  
03:48  
hangover offsets that pleasure with a  
03:51  
more intense pain of longer duration the  
03:53  
following day hence in order to live a  
03:56  
pleasurable life  
03:57  
Epicurus believed that it was the  
04:00  
avoidance of pain that was essential not  
04:03  
the indulgence and pleasures and to  
04:06  
avoid pain we must cultivate discipline  
04:09  
and often decline opportunities to  
04:11  
engage in bodily and sensual pleasures  
04:14  
paradoxically he thought the most  
04:16  
pleasurable life was actually the life  
04:18  
in which we avoid chasing after  
04:20  
pleasures all together as Epicurus wrote  
04:24  
when therefore we say that pleasure is  
04:27  
chief good we are not speaking of the  
04:29  
pleasures of the debauched men or those  
04:32  
which lie in sensual enjoyment as some  
04:35  
think who are ignorant but we mean  
04:37  
freedom of the body from pain and of the  
04:39  
soul from confusion so far so good

04:43

Epicurus answered the first question of

04:45

ethics we identified at the beginning of

04:47

the lecture by arguing that pleasure is

04:49

the ultimate good in life but the

04:52

pleasure we must seek is not sensual

04:54

enjoyment but instead freedom from pain

04:56

worry fear and confusion but what about

05:00

the second question we discussed earlier

05:02

what must we do in order to live the

05:05

most pleasurable life possible Epicurus

05:09

thought that one of the chief obstacles

05:10

preventing most individuals from acting

05:13

in a way which would enable them to

05:15

achieve the good life was they're

05:17

ignorant regarding the nature of their

05:19

desires as he explained all desires can

05:23

be placed in one of three categories

05:25

firstly there are desires which are

05:28

natural and necessary these are the

05:31

desires we share with the animals and

05:33

include the desire for food drink and

05:36

shelter these desires are considered

05:39

natural in that they are not the product

05:41

of social conditioning and they are

05:44  
necessary in that we must fulfill such  
05:46  
desires in order to survive secondly  
05:50  
there are desires which are natural but  
05:53  
unnecessary  
05:54  
the most prominent desire in this  
05:56  
category is the desire for sexual  
05:58  
gratification this desire is wholly  
06:02  
natural and cannot be eliminated  
06:04  
entirely however such a desire can lead  
06:07  
to a painful life if it is not  
06:09  
controlled  
06:10  
we should satiate such a desire no more  
06:14  
than is necessary for the avoidance of  
06:15  
pain but never for the sake of pleasure  
06:18  
itself lastly there are desires which  
06:23  
are unnatural and unnecessary these are  
06:26  
the desires which are most to blame for  
06:28  
our inability to live a pleasurable life  
06:31  
such desires include the desire for  
06:33  
power Fame extreme wealth social  
06:36  
acceptance and all the other desires  
06:38  
socially conditioned into us  
06:41  
these desires chained us to a life of  
06:43  
continual frustration as they are

06:46  
desires that are insatiable and hence  
06:48  
keep us in a continual state of want and  
06:51  
therefore pain to live a pleasurable  
06:54  
life we must say we ate our desires  
06:56  
which are natural but only to the extent  
06:59  
which eliminates pain we must also  
07:02  
discard all desires which are unnatural  
07:04  
the good life is the simple life  
07:07  
Epicurus taught Epicurus practiced what  
07:11  
he preached in Athens he set up a  
07:13  
philosophical sanctuary called the  
07:15  
garden where individuals could practice  
07:17  
self-discipline engage in philosophical  
07:20  
discussions with friends and isolate  
07:22  
themselves from the masses of  
07:23  
individuals who were in a continual  
07:25  
state of misery frustration and madness  
07:28  
pierre hadou in his book what is ancient  
07:31  
philosophy nicely summarized the  
07:33  
epicurean style of life above all  
07:36  
Epicureans believed that it is necessary  
07:39  
to practice the discipline of desire we  
07:42  
must learn to be content with what is  
07:43  
easy to obtain and what satisfies the



07:46

organisms fundamental needs while

07:49

renouncing what is superfluous a simple

07:52

formula but one that cannot but imply a

07:54

radical upheaval of our lives

07:57

it means being content with simple foods

07:59

and simple clothes while renouncing

08:02

wealth honours and public position and

08:04

living in retreat