# Epicurus's Self-Sufficiency

— Experience  Paper  #1

I.      Theory Discussion

How to achieve the **ultimate good** in human's life? This big inquiry has been discussed throughout the history of philosophy from Aristotle's emphasis on **virtue** to Bentham's **maximization of utility**. Epicurus, the founder of hedonism, was an initiator of an ideology that relates ultimate good with **pleasure**. As Cicero discussed in *On the Ends of Good and Evil*, "Pleasure is to be desired and pain is to be avoided, because these facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses."[1]  Epicurus believes pleasure is the highest good in life, and pleasure and pain govern human's actions and experience.

However, I consider that simply equalizing Epicurus's happiness with pleasure cannot distinguish Epicurus from other philosophers. For example, utilitarianism indicates that the ultimate good is "maximizing the overall happiness of more people"[2]. While utilitarian emphasizes on maximization of utility, Epicurean offers another way to achieve happiness: maximizing individual's sufficiency.

This idea could reasonably be found in Epicurus's *Vatican Sayings #68*, as he said: "Nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems too little."[3]  A proper iteration for this sentence can be "People should learn to be sufficient", which demonstrates Epicurus's **critical** attitude towards latter utilitarianism's fundamental idea that "all individuals are self-interested beings which seek the maximization of their own utility" (also indicated by Adam Smith's discussion in his *Wealth of Nations*).

Considering this big distinction between Epicurus and utilitarianism, I pondered the supporting reasons for Epicurus's standpoint. In his *Vatican Sayings*, I found #77 and #79 offered two possible explanations:

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[1]  Cicero, *On the Ends of Good and Evil*
[2]  Michael J Sandel, *Justice: What's the right things to do*
[3]  Cook, Vincent.  "Vatican Sayings."  Epicurus - Vatican Sayings

1. "The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom."

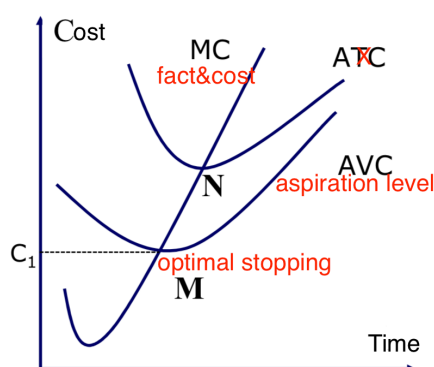2. "The man who is serene causes no disturbance to himself or to another. " [4]

Considering these two sayings, we can deduce that Epicurus indicates self-sufficiency brings benefits in two perspectives: individual's experience(freedom) and society's stabilization(no disturbance).

On the level of individual, Epicurus's opinion reminds me of an economic study in 1950s by Simon, a Nobel Prize Winner, that calculates individual's utility by adding up each difference between the **aspiration level($a_t$)** and **fact($x_t$)** with a **behavioral weight index($w_t$)**, while the **aspiration level($a_t$)** is iteratively based on historical **fact($x_t$)**:

$$U(x) = \sum_t w_t(x_t - a_t)$$

$$a_t = \sum_{t=1}^{t-1} s_{it}\, x_t \qquad [5]$$

This **optimal stopping model** is exactly accord with Epicurus theory, because it manifests that human is not the creature that maximizes **utility**, but maximizes **satisfactory**(sufficiency). As followed, I employed a chart from Mankiw's *Principles of Economics* to illustrate the idea that unceasingly pursuing utility maximization is too costly, so human would stop actions while **fact** meets **aspiration level**:



[6]

[4] Cook, Vincent. "Vatican Sayings." Epicurus - Vatican Sayings

[5] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated by W. D. Ross, Kitchener, Batoche Books, 1999.

[6] N. Greygory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics*

Thus, in an idealistic situation, people could purposely lower their expectation so that they can reach the **Bliss Point**. But can people freely adjust their aspiration to achieve self-sufficiency? This was the first question that I determined to test during my Experience Day.

The second consideration of **no disturbance** guides me to reflect on one of Epicurus's famous idea: **Social Contrast**. Is self-sufficiency a way to coordinate individuals' unchecked freedom and promote society? If Kant is here, he would recommend us to **universalize**[7] this idea: what if everyone lowers his or her aspiration and goes free from the dependence on other individuals?

I believe this idealistic society would be stable and prosper if everyone can stick to the creed, but it partially violates basic humanity(self-interested inclination) due to the better outcomes of uncooperative strategy in this system with egalitarianism.

In order to save space for latter parts, I decide to omit my detailed discussions of repetitive game theory and a test of Pareto Optimization but directly discuss my conclusion:

Therefore, I consider Epicurus's understanding of **ultimate good** as "seeking self-sufficiency by willingly decreasing the gap between aspiration and reality while aspiration would neither rise unlimitedly(like utilitarianism) nor drop below reality(like stoicism).

II.     Personal Application

"Can I really lower my aspiration of life to achieve sufficiency while objectively my aspiration is derived from my personal history and peer effect?"

Hands on electronic piano with a pop tune improvised, I pondered this question in the practice room alone at noon.

I knew what I was always aspiring for: a wonderful tune that can resonate with my soul, more audience that can share my feelings, and unbounded possibilities in music that

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[7] Michael J Sandel, *Justice: What's the right things to do*

enrich my life with uniqueness.

Are those ultimate good? Clearly not. Tune for aesthetic pleasure, audience for honor, and possibilities for freedom. I never deny that everything I value has its end, a realistic end with no noble mission and no blinded altruism.

All my concentration focusing on my feeling while improvising, I saw Epicurus, my today's dear mentor, complacently smile at me as our creed overlapped: nothingness fades, pleasure prevails.

No wonder. Such a wise Epicurus was he, why wouldn't he smile? But I did see a latent frown concealed under his smile, as the placid Mona Lisa did. I knew what he wanna say. He had a challenge.

Such challenge, then I realized, was actually a guest within my contemplation: Is my music, well, self-sufficient? Or, am I self-sufficient?

Relooking at the pop tune I improvised, I saw repetitive major chords wandering around white keys from Am to F to G to C major, with exaggerated syncopations intermixed in the rhythm. Harmonic, impressive, and triggering! But, what was I aspiring for?

Clearly this was not my original taste since my rooted aesthetic inclination was kidnapped by Jou Hisaishi with his orthodox light music at 11. Then, is it the aspiration of social acceptance?

Music, one of the strongest social connection, always enrich community with diversity while also unnoticeably drive society into bigger conformity -- is my aspiration in music also a part of the conformity? I saw Erich Fromm giggling at my so-called freedom again.

"Return to your original position." whispered Epicurus.

Hands down. I examined all my aspirations. some valid, some vain.
Cheerful laughter roared in the yard outside practice room, flaunting the existence of society. My music, in contrary, was actually now the only possession belonged to me.

*"Ha, music itself is life, isn't it? Each note has its ultimate good, and I am going to catch the real ones."* I looked directly into Epicurus's eyes, and he looked me back.

This time, spontaneity dominates my music.

The dominant chords were randomly traveling among D7, G7, and C7 majors with jazz-specific transformable scales, and the leading tone was swinging without certain nodes, emphasizing random notes as if the music was freely breathing. The left hand gradually fused to the *walking base* which created the dynamic to the entity, while the intrinsic gloom in dominant seventh chord enrich the music with complex emotions.

*How pure and tranquil it is!* Usually I would utilize jazz and blues skill as the topper to process exaggerated solo. Under Epicurus's gaze, however, I returned to the nature of jazz music: flowing. The major chords never constantly create alienation between its *home* major and *outside* major as pop music, but always reach harmony within each single chords, just like Epicurus's saying that we should be sufficient by connecting aspiration and reality.

Therefore I realized, the sufficient harmony and vitality within jazz improvising, just like the essence of Epicurus's idea that I comprehended, was the fundament of humanity's aspiration: self-sufficiency.

No more vain desires, no more dependent aspirations. Only sufficiency enclosed me, happiness lasting.

I knew this day I was saved by Epicurus, but could it lasts for more than a day?

Laughter reentered the room, socialization emerged again.

Well, I guess, I hope Epicurus still lives today.


III.    Reflection

Each single event, action, and idea has its rational explanation. Epicurus offers an ideal state to satisfy individuals after his rational consideration, but intuitionally, this state(self-sufficiency) could be too idealistic.

Music, for example, could reach its experience apex with Epicurus's philosophy as I discussed above. But it can't include all the beauty of music. Not even near the reality

of music at all. Music in reality carries much more missions than mere aesthetic feelings. Life, as well as humanity, has its complexity, too.

Thus I found Epicurus's idea applicable during a certain period of time, but it lacks sustainability. Epicurus's is a good try and a great system to consider and a utopian purpose to pursuit. But in real life, there should be more realization and extra ultimate good.