Epicurus

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Introduction

Epicurus founded a community in Athens called "the Garden". Men and women, free persons, and slaves, were all equally accepted. He claimed that the goal of philosophy was to provide a guide to living well. In this, he was in agreement with his famous predecessors, Socrates and Plato. However, he offered a very different view as to what made a life well lived. According to Epicurus, one should maximize pleasures and minimize pains. You should accept pains that lead to greater pleasures. You should reject pleasures that lead to greater pains. Our entry point will be his views about death.

Death

> "For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living."

Epicurus believes that most pain in life comes from fearing death. He asks us to distinguish the pain of death from the pain of anticipating death. He argues that being dead is not itself painful, and he subsequently argues that we should feel no pain in anticipating death. Understanding death makes life enjoyable because it takes away the craving for immortality.

1. Nothing is good or bad for one except sense experience, i.e. feelings of pleasure and pain.
2. The dead don't have any sense experiences.
3. Therefore, nothing is good or bad for the one who is dead.
4. Therefore, the state of being dead is not (good or) bad for the one who is dead.
5. If X is not bad for one when it is present, then there is no rational ground, before it is present, to fear its future presence.
6. Therefore, no living person has any rational ground to fear his future state of being dead.

Hedonism

Our first premise relies on Epicurus' general account of the good life.

> Pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly (*LM* 128).

> The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together (*PD* III).

So, according to Epicurus, happiness is what he calls *ataraxia*, which means, roughly, freedom from disturbance. Epicurus' basic idea is that pleasure consists in the absence of the disturbances and discomfort of desires. Because of the close connection of pleasure with desire-satisfaction, Epicurus devotes a considerable part of his ethics to analyzing different kinds of desires. If pleasure results from getting what you want (desire-satisfaction) and pain from not getting what you want (desire-frustration), then there are two strategies you can pursue with respect to any given desire: you can either strive to fulfill the desire, or you can try to eliminate the desire. For the most part Epicurus advocates the second strategy, that of paring your desires down to a minimum core, which are then easily satisfied. Epicurus distinguishes between three types of desires:

1. Natural and necessary desires:

    - Examples of natural and necessary desires include the desires for food, shelter, and the like.
    - These desires are easy to satisfy, difficult to eliminate (they are 'hard-wired' into human beings naturally), and bring great pleasure when satisfied.
    - Furthermore, they are necessary for life, and they are naturally limited: that is, if one is hungry, it only takes a limited amount of food to fill the stomach, after which the desire is satisfied.
    - Epicurus says that one should try to fulfill these desires.

2. Natural but non-necessary desire:

    - An example of a natural but non-necessary desire is the desire for luxury food. Although food is needed for survival, one does not need a particular type of food to survive.
    - Thus, despite his hedonism, Epicurus advocates a surprisingly ascetic way of life. Although one shouldn't spurn extravagant foods if they happen to be available, becoming dependent on such goods ultimately leads to unhappiness.
    - As Epicurus puts it, "If you wish to make Pythocles wealthy, don't give him more money; rather, reduce his desires."
    - By eliminating the pain caused by unfulfilled desires, and the anxiety that occurs because of the fear that one's desires will not be fulfilled in the future, the Epicurean attains tranquility, and thus happiness.

3. Vain and empty desires:

    - Vain desires include desires for power, wealth, fame, and the like.
    - They are difficult to satisfy, in part because they have no natural limit. If one desires wealth or power, no matter how much one gets, it is always possible to get more, and the more one gets, the more one wants.
    - These desires are not natural to human beings, but they are inculcated by society and by false beliefs about what we need; e.g., believing that having power will bring us security from others.
    - Epicurus thinks that these desires should be eliminated.

Premise 2

P2 relies on E's doctrine of the soul.

- E is an atomist: all reality consists in atoms (i.e. indivisible, indestructible, units of matter) and void.
- Even the soul, according to E, is composed of atoms (i.e. the soul is a body—quite different from Plato and Aristotle), which "dissipate" upon death

Notes

If 1 and 2 are too controversial, maybe we can substitute less controversial variants:

1* Good and bad depend on there being a subject who could experience them

2* Death is the extinction of the 'self' or 'person' — i.e. of the subject capable of experience

Even if we still doubt these premises, Epicurus has raised three pressing problems:

A How can something be bad for *S* if *S* does not or *cannot* mind or care one way or the other, since *S* is non-existent?

B Who could be the possessor or subject of this bad once *S* is non-existent?

C When could the subject suffer this bad?

Responses

Nagel

[1] Death is bad because it involves the deprivation of goods—e.g. perception, thought, emotion

[2] Goods and bads for someone do not depend on that person's awareness of them (cf. *EN* 1.10)

E.g.: Suppose we all have significant others who, while we are here, get together for swinging affairs; suppose that part of our well-being stems from the (perhaps unconscious) faith in our SO's fidelity; suppose further that none of us ever find out about it and that, if anything, the only consequences we experience are in a sense beneficial (e.g. our SO's are nicer, kinder, etc. to us as a result); it still seems like this is bad *for us*

[3] The person who is deprived of goods by death is a "possible person"—i.e. the person who was alive, but so understood as to include the (unrealised) possibilities of her continued life

E.g.: An accident victim suffers head-injuries. Her IQ drops to 20, but she is "happy" or, at least, "cheerful." We tend to think that the "person" is unfortunate; but the current person is quite "happy." So we must be

ascribing the misfortune to the person-she-could-have-been = a "possible person"

So, Nagel rejects both [P1] and [P1*]

Furley

[1] Death is bad because it involves the frustration of our previous plans, hopes and desires

[2] The frustration of our current plans etc. would make our present actions pointless

[3] Hence it is rational to fear death, since it is rational to fear that our current actions are pointless

E.g.: a terminally-ill person is deceived about her condition; her concern with her plans for a holiday next spring is pointless—and she would think so too if she knew about her condition

Furley rejects [P5]

Epicurus' response to Furley

*PD*III

[1] Happiness requires only the satisfaction of our natural and necessary desires

[2] These desires can be satisfied by a self-sufficient life—i.e. one which does not involve long-term projects

[3] So you don't understand what happiness is if you think that it involves long-term projects, etc.

[4] Hence your fear of death is "empty"—i.e. rests on a false belief—and thus irrational