

Epicureanism in Action

Dr. Stephen Minister's PHIL110 How to Live Well - September 18, 2023 - Soobin Rho

Essay

To be an Epicurean for the past two days has been a pleasant experience. In fact, I am going to continue being an Epicurean, although I'll be both a Stoic and Epicurean at the same time. I won't be a full Stoic or a full Epicurean. Rather, I consider myself to be a partial Stoic and partial Epicurean, only adopting parts of the principles that I think are well suited for my life. I find that there are things I like in every school of philosophy I encounter in my *How to Live Well* class. This essay explains which of the Epicurean principles I liked and how they are now integrated into my everyday life.

Part 1

"While every pleasure is naturally good, not every pleasure should be chosen. Likewise, every pain is naturally evil, but not every pain is to be avoided. Only upon considering all consequences should we decide." (How to be an Epicurean by Catherine Wilson, pg. 2)

This is the first Epicurean principle I decided to use everyday in my life, not just for the two days of this assignment, but also for the foreseeable future of my life. This is something where I feel like I always have known, even though I didn't know how to formulate up until now. This principle is a perfect formulation of what I always wanted to believe in and live by, the perfect principle I can apply to my own life.

Friday, September 15, 2023, in a three-hour American Airlines flight from Chicago to Boston, I held my phone creating a Google Doc named "living_well_epicureanism." I could have been just listening to a podcast or playing mobile video games, which we tend to consider as a pleasure. Even though listening to a podcast or playing a video game is a pleasure that is naturally good, I decided to work on my *How to Live Well* class's assignment instead. Why? "Only upon considering all consequences should we decide."

You see, working on this assignment means two things. (a) I achieve the goal of this class - i.e. to learn the philosophical bodies of how to live well - and (b) to fully enjoy HackMIT for the upcoming weekend and not worry about my assignments. This, it appeared to me, finishing my assignment is the best way to spend my three-hour flight, and not just listening to a podcast or playing videogames.

I, however, fell asleep. What an irony! I thought it's best to work on the assignment. Instead, I fell asleep for one hour and forty minutes, and no, there's no but. No excuses there hahaha

Part 2

"I encourage you, as always, to study and practice the things which are the ingredients of happiness." (Selections from Epicurus, pg. 1)

Despite falling asleep against my wishes, I did not scold myself. Nor did I think I did a bad thing. By falling asleep, I felt much more refreshed, and in fact, every paragraph except for the first two paragraphs in this essay was written after I took this nap. The act of falling asleep was not a bad choice at all. On the contrary, even though it might not be the ideal choice I could have made, it was an excellent one nonetheless.

Let's take a step back and examine what we just did here. "Study and practice the things which are the ingredients of happiness." This is what I was doing. We had better, Epicurus implies, strive to examine ourselves constantly, especially with regards to what makes us happy and therefore what could be a good life for ourselves. I like this. It implies happiness and therefore a good life can be achieved with our own effort. In fact, this has now become one of my core principles: keep looking back at myself and asking whether or not I am doing the right thing. So, how would this principle translate into my real life? I have a daily rule where I sit down in this specific position and just get rid of all distractions, such as phones and work, for at least 10 minutes. I do

not restrict myself any more than that so that my mind can think about whatever is in my mind, but my rule is to do this for everyday for as long as my lifetime allows. I made it specifically as simple and easy to do as possible so that it becomes a habit that I can sustain for as long as I want to.

Up until this point in my life, which is about 30 days ago where I started daily rules, which conveniently happen to be based on some bits and pieces from the Stoicism and Epicureanism, my own life felt distant. Yes, it was my own life, and yet, I felt as though I was not in the driver seat. Why? I had lots of habits – e.g. constantly checking my phone or mindlessly scrolling down on social media. These habits, which I never intended to have on the first place, were eating up all my time. This is exactly what made me feel distant from my own life, because now, armed with Stoic and Epicurean principles, I feel a change in my life, possibly the biggest change I've ever made in my life. This, you see, is a beginning of my life. Thank you, Dr. Minister, for creating this assignment.

“Some people, indeed, only begin to live when it is time for them to leave off living. And if this seems surprising to you, I shall add that which will surprise you still more: Some people have left off living before they have begun. Farewell.” (Letters to Lucilius, Selection #1 by Seneca, pg. 3)

Relevant Quotes for Later Essays

How to be an Epicurean by Catherine Wilson

"Happiness is a feeling of in-the-moment joy that can't be chased and caught and which can't last very long." (pg. 1)

"A third major school of philosophy, Stoicism, represented by a number of teachers and writers in the Greek and Roman traditions, including Epictetus and Seneca, reverted to the Platonic view that external events cannot diminish the wellbeing of the good person. The world, they thought, is ruled by providence; all that happens is fated to happen, and we must embrace our individual fates and the past and the future that has been determined for us. As things could not have happened otherwise, regret and remorse over past decisions and actions are pointless. Not only regret, but all emotions, including anger, pity and love, are 'diseases' of the soul in need of a cure, though a general benevolence towards humanity was permissible. An emotional reaction, they maintained, always involves the illusion that some external event, a rejection letter, or a friend's betrayal, or meeting someone fantastic, or being tortured, is objectively bad or good for you. An emotion, they said, is just a bodily disturbance that causes mental disturbance. To restore tranquility, one should remember that these things happen all the time, that they were fated to happen, and that the self is an 'inner citadel' that can withstand any attack. Stoicism has many adherents even today because it offers explicit coping mechanisms for

everyday adversities. Psychotherapeutic techniques that involve getting distance or perspective on individual problems have a lot of overlap with Stoic techniques. But there are many problems with Stoicism. One problem with Stoic practices is that emotions make life feel worth living. Emotional numbness and absence of motivation is the main feature of depression. Drugs that reduce affect are widely disliked by patients who have been prescribed them. Recent empirical work suggests that we need the emotions to make decisions; otherwise we just waffle endlessly, making up rationales and counter-rationales for some course of action. And finally, the Stoic claim that pity for the suffering of others just makes you feel bad yourself is deeply inhuman." (pg. 2)

"Epicurus and his followers formed a sort of commune based in Epicurus's house, surrounded by a 'garden', outside the city walls. The Epicureans took their meals in common, discussed science and ethics, and socialised. Women were included in the sect, and their flourishing was not understood differently to that of men. Epicurus was notorious for his nonmarital relationships that combined sex and philosophy." (pg. 2-3)

"Rather than aiming specifically to maximise pleasure, the Epicureans concentrated on minimising pains, the pains that arise from failures of 'choice and avoidance' ... One must sometimes sacrifice appealing food and drink in the short term to avoid the long-term pains of addiction and poor health; and sacrifice sexual opportunity to avoid humiliation, anger or social or economic fallout." (pg. 3-4)

"But everyone can agree too that the pleasure of being recognised, appreciated and rewarded, though it is also fleeting, is different from the truly intoxicating moments of happiness in which we feel in tune with another individual or become totally absorbed in something outside the self." (pg. 5)

Selections from Epicurus

"I encourage you, as always, to study and practice the things which are the ingredients of happiness." (pg. 1)

"Accustom yourself to thinking that death is no concern to us. All things good and bad are experienced through sensation, but sensation ceases at death. So death is nothing to us, and to know the truth of this makes a mortal life happy -- not by adding infinite time, but by removing the desire for immortality. There is no reason why one who is convinced that there is nothing to fear at death should fear anything about it during life. And whoever says that he dreads death not because it's painful to experience, but only because it's painful to contemplate, is foolish. It is pointless to agonize over something that brings no trouble when it arrives. So death, the most dreaded of evils, is nothing to us, because when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist. It neither concerns the living nor the dead, since death does not exist for the living, and the dead no longer exist." (pg. 1)

"For just as he would not choose the greatest amount of food over what is most delicious, so too he does not seek the longest possible life, but rather the happiest." (pg. 1)

"Some are necessary for happiness, some for health, and some for life itself. A correct view of these matters enables one to base every choice and avoidance upon whether it secures or upsets bodily comfort and peace of mind -- the goal of a happy life." (pg. 1)

"It is when we feel pain that we must seek relief, which is pleasure. And when we no longer feel pain, we no longer need pleasure." (pg. 2)

"While every pleasure is naturally good, not every pleasure should be chosen. Likewise, every pain is naturally evil, but not every pain is to be avoided. Only upon considering all consequences should we decide." (pg. 2)

"Plain meals offer the same pleasure as luxurious fare, so long as the pain of hunger is removed. Bread and water offer the greatest pleasure for those in need of them. Accustoming oneself to a simple lifestyle is healthy and it doesn't sap our motivation to perform the necessary tasks of life. Doing without luxuries for long intervals allows us to better appreciate them and keeps us fearless against changes of fortune." (pg. 2)

"In a scholarly debate, whoever loses gains the most because they have learned the most." (pg. 2)

"A happy and eternal being [i.e., a god] neither has trouble itself nor does it cause trouble for anyone else; therefore, it does not experience feelings of anger or partiality, for such feelings signify weakness." (pg. 3)

"Question each of your desires: 'What will happen to me if that which this desire seeks is achieved, and what if it is not?'" (pg. 4)

"Nothing is enough to one for whom enough is too little." (pg. 4)

"Natural desires are both limited and easily satisfied, but vanity is insatiable." (pg. 4)

"One will not banish emotional distress, nor gain lasting joy through great wealth, fame, celebrity, or anything else which is a result of unlimited desires." (pg. 4)

"The esteem of others is outside our control; we must attend instead to healing ourselves." (pg. 5)

"Of all the things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship ... even in our limited conditions of life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship." (pg. 5)

"Don't ruin what you have by wanting what you don't have; but remember that what you have now was once among the things you only hoped for." (pg. 5)

"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the person is not able to live wisely, though he lives well and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life." (pg. 5)