Anxiety According to Epicurus and Epictetus

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Epicurus has a simple and plausible account of how we come to be anxious or worried. We come to be anxious, Epicurus says, when we desire something but believe we might not attain that thing. On this account, believing one might not attain something that one desires is both necessary and sufficient for anxiety.

Epictetus agrees that believing that one might not attain something one desires is necessary for anxiety. He disagrees, though, that it is sufficient. One can, says Epictetus, want something, indeed want it dearly, while strongly believing one might not attain it, and yet not be anxious about it at all. According to Epictetus, one will not be anxious just so long as one does not care whether one attains the end one desires.

Does that even make sense? How could one want something and yet not care whether one attains it? It does make sense, or so at least I hope to show. Epictetus's view is not internally inconsistent. It does, though, rest on a few controversial, and I would say false, doctrines.

Before we take up the dispute between Epicurus and Epictetus on the origin of anxiety, let me introduce the two philosophers whose thoughts we will be discussing.

Epicurus was born in 341 BC and died in 270, which makes him a philosopher of the earliest years of the last of the three great ages of ancient Greek civilization, the Hellenistic period, the beginning of which is usually marked from the death of Alexander the Great, in 323. In 306, when he was 35, Epicurus purchased a house and a garden in Athens and invited his followers to join him there, creating something like a commune. 306 BC is about 17 years after the death of Alexander and, so about 17 years into the wars fought among the first generation of Alexander's successors. Athens at this time, although no longer in its glory, was still a centre of philosophy and culture; its democracy, though, in both power and prestige was comparable to a standard municipal government today.

Epicurus and his associates taught in Epicurus's garden and published their innumerable tracts from within his house. Their mission was to equip all people—men, women, free, and slave—with the tools required to become happy. Epicurus was a prolific writer, as were others associated with the Garden. And yet, all that has survived of Epicurus's literary output are three letters, one of which probably is not directly from Epicurus's hand, and two sets of sayings.

Epicurus's philosophy derives from the philosophy of Leucippus and Leucippus's pupil, Democritus. Democritus was born 120 years or more before Epicurus, most probably before 460 BC, and he philosophized during the time of Socrates. Though counted a pre-Socratic philosopher,

Democritus survived Socrates by a decade or two. What we know of the lives, doctrines, and arguments of Leucippus and Democritus is even less than what we know of those of Epicurus. Epicurus took from Democritus three key features of Democritus's philosophy: 1) atomism, the thesis that all that exists is matter and void and that matter is ultimately composed of indivisible and imperishable particles; 2) mechanism, the thesis that causation is entirely a matter of atoms hitting and, thereby, moving other atoms, and never a matter of ends or purposes working their way to fruition; and 3) disdain for any ethical theory that posits a realm of value by which to evaluate goings on in this world of atoms and void. On the other hand, Epicurus rejected Democritus's thesis that only statements about atoms and void can be entirely true (statements about ordinary objects, Democritus held, can be true only by convention). Epicurus might also have rejected Democritus's determinism.

Epictetus, ethnically and linguistically a Greek, was born a slave in the Roman empire sometime after AD 50. He died around 138. While a slave, Epictetus studied philosophy in Rome under Musonius Rufus, and, after being manumitted, he began to teach there. In 93, the emperor Domitian banished the philosophers from Rome. Epictetus settled in Nicopolis, in North-Western Greece, on the Adriatic, where he established a thriving school. In his day, Epictetus was as well known a philosopher and teacher as Plato or Aristotle had been in their day.

Epictetus is a stoic philosopher, a member of the school founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the years just after Epicurus began teaching in his garden. For stoic philosophers, nothing has value except virtue, and all people but sages are fools. (Who has been a sage? Socrates, maybe.) Stoicism was most rigorously developed by Chrysippus, two generations after Zeno. Stoics in the two-and-a-half centuries between Chrysippus and Epictetus include the Romans Cicero and Seneca.

We have from Epictetus only two works, neither of which was written by Epictetus himself. The two works are four books of the *Discourses* (the *Discourses* might originally have comprised eight books) and a pamphlet, the *Enchiridion* (the Manual or Handbook). Both were set down by Epictetus's pupil Arrian, who later became prominent in the empire as an historian and military commander.

There are two important points on which Epicurus and Epictetus agree, one or the other of which many other philosophers reject. The first is that anxiety, whatever else it might be or contain, is a feeling, an affective state. To be anxious or worried or fearful or in trepidation is to be in a state of feeling. The second point is that anxiety robs us of happiness. An anxious or worried or fearful person is not a happy person, at least not for the time he or she is anxious or worried or fearful. Moreover, a person prone to anxiety cannot be a happy person through any stretch of time. For both Epicurus and Epictetus, anxiety, and even simply the possibility that one might become anxious, is the great barrier to living happily.

But that's about all on which Epicurus and Epictetus agree. Even the second point above marks a difference between them if we look at it a bit more closely. Epicurus would have us live without anxiety so that we can live happily. That anxiety robs us of happiness is enough to warrant our seeking to remove anxiety from our lives. For Epictetus, however, we are not to be concerned about our happiness. Even though anxiety robs us of happiness, that is no reason to seek not to be anxious, for we ought not seek to be happy. We ought, rather, to seek to be good, to live according to nature, in the way nature or God would have us live. Now, should we live as we ought to live, we will be happy. Nature or God is providential and just and good, and so right living will inevitably be

capped with happiness. Should we make ourselves worthy of happiness, that is, we will, of necessity, be happy. But should our happiness be our motive in what we do, we will thereby fail to make ourselves worthy of happiness; happiness will, then, again by necessity, elude us.

We can capture both where Epicurus and Epictetus agree and differ by saying that though for each of them an anxious person is not living well, for Epicurus that person's anxiety is the cause of his not living well while for Epictetus that person's anxiety is merely a symptom of his not living well.

Let us return to Epicurus's account of the origin of anxiety. A reason for doing something, according to Epicurus, is a belief/desire pair. The desire sets an end and motivates the person to perform the action; the belief guides the person to that end. I desire to return your serve sharply, and I believe that I can best return your serve sharply by taking it on my forehand side, so I move to my forehand side in order to return your serve sharply. Anxiety or worry or fear or trepidation enters when along with desiring something and believing that such-and-such is the way to attain that thing, one believes that one might well fail to attain that thing. I'm worried, then, to the degree that I believe I might fail to return your serve sharply.

That's Epicurus's account of the origin of anxiety. Anxiety, that particular feeling, is produced by the belief that one might not satisfy some desire one has. The connection here, for Epicurus, is as lawful as any psychological connection could be. If one wants something but also thinks that one might not get the thing that one wants, then one will feel anxious or worried. Now, of course, a person can be more or less anxious about things she wants. One will be less worried about something to the degree either that one doesn't much care about getting it or that one is confident that one will get it. If returning your serve sharply doesn't much matter to me, then I won't feel as worried as I would if it did matter much to me; and if I think the chance that I will fail to return it sharply is small, then I won't feel as worried as I would if my doubts were strong. In the end, though, if one is not at all worried while pursuing some end, then either one isn't actually pursuing that end or one doesn't doubt that one will attain it.

Anguish or despair receives similar treatment. Anxiety is produced by the belief that you might not attain some end you want to attain; anguish is produced by the belief that in fact you won't attain that end. Again, the connection is tight: if you want it and believe that you will not get it, you will feel anguish. (I fall into anguish as I see your serve sailing by my outstretched racket.)

For Epicurus, anxiety and anguish destroy happiness. Anxiety and anguish are, indeed, the main destroyers of happiness. Without anxiety and anguish, we would be as happy as the gods, at least until injury or disease brings us bodily pain. It's this view, that anxiety and anguish are the great impediments to happiness, that generates Epicurus's central piece of advice regarding the art of living. That advice is to desire only those things one can confidently expect to attain. A person, says Epicurus, is at any moment happy to the extent, but only to the extent, that she is enjoying something she likes under the confident expectation that she will continue to enjoy things she likes. Since that is what it is to be happy, wisdom counsels that we like and, so, desire only those things we can confidently expect to receive.

Epictetus, for his part, does not doubt that often enough those who desire a thing and believe that they might not attain that thing will be anxious and those who desire a thing and believe that they will not attain it will be anguished. Epictetus denies, though, that desiring a thing and believing one might not attain it is sufficient for being anxious. First, Epictetus says, one must care that one gets that thing one desires to get. If one cares whether one gets the thing one desires and believes

one might not get it, then, but only then, will one be anxious. On the other hand, if one doesn't care whether one gets what one desires, then one won't be anxious, no matter how unlikely one supposes getting it to be. The same goes for anguish. One will be anguished if one cares to have the thing one desires and believes one won't have it. But one won't be anguished if one doesn't care whether one has that thing, even though one believes one never will have it.

Apathy, indifference is the key. Go ahead, says Epictetus, want with all your heart to return the serve smartly—want with all your heart to return the serve smartly even as you doubt you'll manage even to touch it. You will not be anxious, despite your desire and your doubts, so long as you don't really care whether that desire gets fulfilled.

Now how is that possible? How could one want something dearly and yet not really care whether one gets it? Indeed, it is *not* possible, says Epicurus. Our desires and wants stem from our affective nature, from our likes, from our cares. If you didn't care whether you returned the serve smartly, you wouldn't desire to return it smartly. That you desire to return it smartly indicates that it matters to you that you return it smartly.

There is an answer to the question how it is possible to desire something and yet not care whether one attains it or not, a plausible answer, but it is not Epictetus's answer. The answer is this: we care about lots of things, lots and lots of things. I care about tennis, I care about my physical integrity, I care about fairness. Moreover, I don't like to feel anxious or anguished, primarily because of the felt quality of the state itself, but importantly also because being anxious or anguished is debilitating. An anxious or anguished person isn't going to do well at whatever tasks she sets herself. Because I don't like how it feels to be anxious and because I want to do well at my tasks, I have strong reasons not to be anxious or, at least, not to wallow in anxiety.

That is not to say that I can, simply by force of will, refuse to be anxious. When Epictetus declares that some things are within my power, and limits these to my mental states, he does not mean that I can will myself into or out of a particular mental state, just like that. What it is to say, rather, is that I can, and should, both attend to the matter at hand without fretting and remember the place of the matter at hand within my life as a whole. By concentrating on what I believe I have to do in order to return your serve smartly, I remove my doubts from my mind and, thereby, ease my anxiety; by recalling that this serve of yours will begin just one rally in a game, in just one game in a set, in just one set of a match, and that the fun of playing well matters to me whether I win or lose, I survey things from the perspective of the whole and, thereby, come to care about returning your serve smartly no more than I should care.

This is not Epictetus's way out of the paradox within his contention that we can desire something though not care whether we attain it or not. Epictetus goes far beyond these observations. We might note, though, that recent psychologists and others who claim to be indebted to Epictetus do address the paradox in this way. Albert Ellis, for instance, the developer of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, teaches that we can overcome anxiety and find happiness by rooting out false beliefs about ourselves and the world and appreciating the debilitating effects states such as anxiety have in our lives.

Epicurus, of course, can accept that we can lower our level of anxiety in a situation by either focusing on the matter at hand or placing that matter within the context of the rest our lives. Nothing in these observations tells against anything in his account of the origin of anxiety. Yet Epicurus would caution us that lowering the level of anxiety in a situation is not the same as lowering the level of anxiety in one's life generally. We ought not, Epicurus would say, think that the solution to

anxiety and anguish lies in having more and more projects. Epicurus would point out that by adopting another project we make our lives more complex and, thereby, open ourselves even more to anxiety, disappointment, and anguish. The more things we care about, the more tasks we assign ourselves, the greater will be the number of things that can go wrong; the more things we care about, then, the more things we will have about which to worry.

A plausible contention we discussed above is that we won't feel as anxious about things if we understand their comparative value alongside all the many other things we like and value. I said that this contention is not Epictetus's resolution to the problem of anxiety, to the problem how we can limit anxiety by caring less about the things we desire while still desiring them. The difference between the plausible contention we discussed above and Epictetus's thought is that the plausible contention makes reference only to the values of things as they emerge within the system that is our affective life. It does not refer to the real or true value of things, the value they have in themselves, however we might value them. Epictetus's account of anxiety and how anxiety is possible does, though, appeal to the idea that our pursuits have or lack value independently of how they fit with other of our pursuits. We are anxious, then, says Epictetus, not, or not merely, because we overvalue certain things given the system of our affects, but rather because we fail to understand the value these things have in themselves.

Epictetus holds that desiring something one believes one might not attain will not itself bring one anxiety so long as one understands the true or real value of that which one desires. If one does understand its true or real value, one will be indifferent to attaining it.

The first step in appreciating the true or real value of things is understanding their physical nature. Suppose you enjoy a fine ceramic pot, and you would like to display this pot so that others can enjoy it as well. Go ahead, then, Epictetus says, display your pot! But know that pots break. That they break is in their nature. Know that by displaying your pot, someone might accidentally, or on purpose, break it. That people get distracted or stumble is in their nature; that people are wilfully destructive is also in their nature.

One loves one's son. Well, fine, love one's son! But know that children often go bad or otherwise fail to meet one's expectations for them, even one's well informed and reasonable expectations for them. And know that sometimes children die.

Are we, though, here imagining cases in which one doesn't care whether one gets what one wants? Are we imagining cases in which a person is indifferent to failure?

It seems not. You want to display your pot and you know that in doing so you are putting your pot at risk of destruction. But you care that people have the opportunity to enjoy your pot. You are concerned that your pot remain intact, but you accept the risk in order to attain your end. Knowing that your pot could get broken cannot by itself, then, be what keeps your mind easy while your pot is on display. What keeps your mind easy, rather, is that you are succeeding in your endeavour. People are enjoying your pot.

So far you are simply following Epicurus's advice to want nothing more than that some, just a few, people enjoy your pot, for that is a desire easy to fulfil.

Likewise, knowing that my son might go rotten or die is not by itself what keeps my mind easy. What keeps it easy is my wanting only the pleasures I get right now from loving my son. I will again be worried should I want that I continue to love him—and to love him in the flesh, not as a memory. I'm acting in line with Epicurus's advice: I'm limiting my desire to those I have reason to think I will very likely satisfy.

In these cases, one will still feel despair if one wants something too much and doesn't attain it. But Epictetus wants to say go ahead and want some improbable outcome; go ahead and want it with all your heart. Understanding the physical nature of the things is necessary, according to Epictetus, to avoiding anxiety and anguish, but it isn't sufficient.

Now if you don't display your pot, others won't enjoy it—it might as well already lie broken in the trash. So display it, let others enjoy it. If you think it is better that it be displayed though it gets broken than that it remains safe hidden in a closet, then, should it get broken, you won't mind, even though you desire that it remains intact. You won't mind that your pot is broken, for it has served its purpose, at least as well as fate allowed it to. And, so, you won't be anxious about its safety while it is on display, and you won't be sad to sweep up its shards.

But why think that it is better that others have the opportunity to enjoy your pot than that the pot remain safe tucked away? Why think any state of affairs better or worse than any other state of affairs? The answer here, at least for Epictetus, isn't to be found in the strength of one's desires or affections. Epicurus, for his part, might well hold that really, strength of affection is all there is to it. But should Epictetus agree with Epicurus on this point, he could no longer hold, against Epicurus, that nothing but being indifferent between possible states of affairs conquers anxiety. Epictetus needs to hold that states of affairs have the value they do independently of our desires and affections.

This understanding of value is the key to the matter. According to Epictetus, we have good reason to believe that the universe, all that exists, tends toward and tends to its own good. There is nothing outside the universe to direct or impede the universe in its movement. This implies that everything that occurs occurs because it should occur—and each state of affairs that obtains is just the state of affairs that should obtain.

Our task, as the parts of the universe we are, is to find our place, our role in the movement of things, and to inhabit that role. Understanding that the world is moving as it is through the necessity internal to it and that all that happens happens for the good, we can understand that however our lives go in respect of getting or failing to get what we want, it's all for the best. That is the thought, should one be able to sustain it, that will account for one's affective indifference between the outcome one wants and the outcome one gets.

If one actually believes that when one attains what one wants, that was how it was meant to be from the perspective of the good of the whole, and that when one fails to attain what one wants, that, too, was how it was meant to be from the perspective of the good of the whole, then one will not worry about failing while pursuing some end, nor will one be anguished should one fail. One will be happy either way.

You want to display your pot forever, but your pot falls and breaks a day after you set it out for people to admire. Your pot, then, you realize, was meant to fall and break on that day, and those people who got to admire it while it was intact, and only those people, were meant to admire it. And it is best that your pot broke as it did and that those people, but only those people, got to see it.

Epictetus's position, then, is that no one suffers anxiety or anguish who understands: i) that whether one realizes one's desire is a matter of how the wheels of necessity turn; and, ii) that the wheels of necessity turn always for the best. So desire away! The sources of pain are selfishness and misunderstanding, not unfulfilled desire. Selfishness, as the selfish person wants that his desires are fulfilled, whatever they are, because they are *his* desires, when really he should want only that the desires he should have are fulfilled, and want them to be fulfilled only because it is right that they be fulfilled. Misunderstanding, as the ignorant person thinks that sometimes he has the power

to affect the course of events, when really whatever happens happens by way of necessity and providence. To live, then, in light of one's understanding of oneself as part of a whole and in the knowledge that all happens for the best of the whole is to live without anxiety or anguish.

Let us add a caution. Epictetus, we noted earlier, rejected inquiry into the art of living happily as beside the point. One ought to be indifferent even toward one's own happiness (and toward one's own misery, if miserable one is). That one is unhappy is, like everything else, overall part of the best. One is to live virtuously not for the sake of one's happiness but just for the sake of virtue. Strive not to be happy, fair child, strive instead to be worthy of happiness. (Because the universe is providential and the virtuous are worthy of happiness, the virtuous will be happy. But this thought must, on pain of vice, play no role in one's coming to virtue.)

Now in one sense, once we recall these points, Epicurus has won the particular debate whether anxiety and anguish must accompany fear of failure and acknowledgement of failure. Epicurus says they must, while Epictetus originally denied that they must; but Epictetus's denial rests on the idea that one who understands that everything happens of necessity and for the best will find in particular failure nothing but overall success. The stoic whose pot was broken soon after he put it up for display was not anguished because he believed that his pot's breaking was all for the good. Given that he most wants that things move toward the good, he got what he most wanted. Anxiety and anguish, then, do, for Epictetus as much as for Epicurus, follow fear of failure and failure. The difference between Epicurus and Epictetus is just that a convinced stoic cannot recognize failure in any outcome whatever. Failure from the point of view of one set of desires is not failure overall, for it is not failure in promoting the good overall, and promoting the good overall is what a stoic wants most of all.

The sense in which the Epicurus has won the debate is rather shallow, though. It comes from collapsing the distinction Epictetus insists on, the distinction between what one specifically wants at some particular moment and the higher level attitudes that explain and rationalize why one wants that specific thing at that particular moment.

A more fruitful route of criticism is to examine Epictetus's claim that all happens for the best. There are two problems with this claim. The first is that it is hard to see how it is a claim at all, how it expresses any proposition. What is its content? All that happens happens for the best—but for *whose* best? The answer, of course, is for the universe's best. But for the universe to have a best, the universe must possess desires and intentions. It must be an agent. The conviction that the universe is an agent would seem more to express an affective attitude one opts to take rather than a belief that could be true or false, and better or worse evidenced.

The second problem arises with this solution to the first. Suppose that "all that happens happens for the best" expresses a point of view one can take toward things, a commitment one has to look for the best in whatever happens and to value it. Now certainly one who has such a commitment might well prosper in virtue of having that commitment. Such a commitment might well, that is, stand between one's particular projects and the threat of anxiety or anguish. But as a commitment, and not a belief, it cannot serve as a ground for itself. So what would ground this commitment? What would cause and, at least potentially, justify one's having this commitment? Nothing other, one would think, than one's desire to avoid anxiety and anguish. This result, though, conflicts with the stoic principle that our values are to answer to the real value of things, for here desire—the desire to avoid anxiety and anguish—answers only to itself.

This is a standard criticism of stoicism, that the claim that all things are for the best is either

false or not a claim at all. Even so, it cuts to the heart of the matter whether the stoics are right that concerted striving toward one's deeply-held goals need not put one at risk of anxiety or anguish. Epictetus is right only if one can hold that all things are for one's best, and believe it on good evidence, so that one doesn't risk ceasing to believe it.

Epicurus, for his part, would seem to be right that desire coupled with the belief that one might not succeed must produce anxiety, and desire coupled with the belief that one won't succeed must produce anguish. And yet Epicurus, with Epictetus, would seem to be wrong on the larger topic of the place of anxiety and anguish in living a happy life. As Aristotle maintains, anxiety and the possibility of anguish are goads to accomplishment and accomplishment is central to living happily. This claim, though, can be true only if Epicurus is wrong that there are no peak experiences, that all pleasures are merely absences of pain. But Aristotle's dispute with Epicurus on the art of living is a topic for another day.