Varieties of Epicureanism

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Epicurus's philosophy culminates in a set of directives on the art of living. Follow these directives, Epicurus says, and you will live happily, whatever turns the world takes. Fail to follow them and you still *might* live happily, for luck could be on your side, but most probably you won't. Here is Epicurus's complete instruction, so far as I understand his philosophy: 1) Desire only that which you need in order to live; 2) Be simple and plain in matters of taste; 3) Save for a rainy day; 4) Fear only that which in fact is frightening; 5) Be on good terms with people generally; 6) Avoid politics and society; 7) Cultivate a few, but only a few, good friendships.

For the most part, Epicurus's directives themselves are not surprising or controversial pieces of advice for living a happy life. Most thinkers who have turned their attention to the art of living happily include some items from Epicurus's list on their own lists. (Of course, any one of the items on Epicurus's list could be challenged as sound advice, and probably each of them has been challenged.) The two most controversial are 6) and 2). 6) is clearly controversial in that for many thinkers part of one's identity is inevitably to be found in the structures and mores of one's culture or community. If one's individual happiness requires being true to one's identity, to being true to oneself as one actually or deeply is, and part of what one is is this particular node in this specific community, then one's happiness depends on one's finding and inhabiting one's place in the political and social life of one's community. 2) is also controversial, though perhaps only when one sees that Epicurus is here instructing us to avoid sophistication and refinement. The happy life, for Epicurus, is not the life of self-realization through the development of one's talents and the education of one's tastes.

If, then, with one or two exceptions, the items on the list enjoy wide acceptance, it is not simply its endorsement of the list that makes a philosophy Epicurean. It is, rather, its endorsement of the list in conjunction with at least two other things. One of these is what is *not* on the list. Most importantly, Epicurus does not instruct us to be good or to endeavour to do the right thing. He does not see our happiness as bound up with any concern we might have to be good people or to will to do the right thing for the right reason. Indeed, Epicurus counsels us not to have any such concerns, if we aim to be happy. The other involves the reasons why for Epicurus happiness is ensured by living according to these directives, and by living according to these directives alone. Epicurean philosophy ranges over physics and metaphysics, epistemology and psychology, and ethics and value theoryCalmost all of it serving to generate or justify Epicurus's practical advice regarding how to live happily. Epicurus bases his advice on a set of contentions regarding the nature of matter, the nature of the gods, what we can know of the world and how we know it, the psychology of motivation, the nature of value, the point of treating others well, the nature of pleasure, the relation between desire and pleasure and pain, and the place of pleasant experience in the happy life. A philosophy is Epicurean, then, only if it generates its list of directives out of doctrines and arguments more or less in Epicurus's spirit.

What most interests me in Epicureanism are Epicurus's thoughts about motivation and value, and how they figure, first, in the argument that to live happily one must pursue one's own pleasure, and, second, in the argument that to pursue one's own pleasure one ought not be concerned to do the right thing for the right reason. Epicurus's doctrines and arguments regarding motivation and value can be understood in different ways, resulting in the varieties of Epicureanism of my title. I will begin my discussion of these varieties with what I think is the most implausible version, and by criticising it formulate the second, less implausible, version. (Not a few commentators on Epicurus take the first variety to be Epicurus's own.) Eventually,

through criticising previous versions, I will formulate a variety of Epicureanism I think defensible on its own grounds, though I doubt it is a variety Epicurus himself ever considered.

But let us begin at the end, with Epicurus's most immediate justifications for his advice.

The most important directive is the first, desire only that which you need in order to live. This directive is supported by a tripod consisting of Epicurus's analysis of pleasure, his thesis that there is nothing to living happily over and above living pleasantly, and his contention that it can be very easy to live pleasantly. Let us examine each leg of the tripod separately, and then consider how together they support the directive to limit one's desires to what one needs.

1) Pleasure, for Epicurus, is merely the absence of pain. It has in itself no positive existence. Take away a person's pain, and that person will then experience pleasure. A person's experiences are purely, completely and unsurpassably pleasant just so long as that person is feeling no pain.

In denying that there is anything that makes an experience pleasant other than the absence of pain, Epicurus rejects what might be the majority view, that some experiences are in themselves or positively pleasant, and that as such those experiences differ from the affectively neutral experience of merely not being in pain. There's being in pain, the majority say, there's neither being in pain nor experiencing pleasure, and there's actually experiencing pleasure. Why does Epicurus reject the majority view?

Epicurus thinks there are two types of pleasure and pain, pleasure and pain of the body or flesh, and pleasure and pain of the mind or soul. The latter type collects all pleasures and pains that depend on the person having some particular desire. The former, then, collects all the pleasures and pains left over, those whose occurrence does not depend on the person having any particular desire. When I stub my toe, it hurts, whatever is true with regard to my conative state. And when my back is rubbed, it feels good. On the other hand, then, when I experience the pain of defeat, I do so only because I wanted to win, and likewise when I experience the thrill of

victory. Epicurus thinks there are two types of pleasure and pain, bodily and mental or emotional, and so in order to understand why he rejects the majority view that pleasure is a positive state of mind, we must understand why he thinks pleasures of each sort are merely absences of pain.

To see that the majority view is mistaken with regard to bodily pleasure, we need only to reflect on the experience of health and physical wellbeing. It's pleasant to be healthy and well. But there is nothing to the experience of health and wellness beyond not feeling pained or ill or fatigued. Reflect also on the experience of hunger or thirst. It's pleasant not to be hungry or thirsty, but again not being hungry or thirsty is nothing other than not experiencing one or another certain sort of pain. And so there is no positive experience of bodily pleasure. There is merely bodily pain and its absence. What the majority thinks is a neutral experience is as pleasant an experience as there is.

Epicurus's reasoning in the case of mental or emotional pleasure is similar. A pleasure is of the mental or emotional kind, as we have seen, in virtue of standing in a necessary relation to a desire or other conative state. That is, a pleasure is mental or emotional if it depends on the person having (or having had) some desire. Epicurus's argument against the majority view on the question of mental or emotional pleasure begins with the contention that mental or emotional pleasure is nothing other than, nothing over and above, fulfilled or satisfied desire. It's pleasant to get or to have what one wants. And no pleasure depends on one having a desire in any way other than resulting from a fulfilled or satisfied desire. Now the state of desiring something, Epicurus says, is unpleasant, for to desire something is always, necessarily, to experience the pain of lack. (If one does not feel that one is lacking something when one does not have that thing, and is not disturbed by that feeling, then one does not actually desire that thing.) But if desiring something is itself painful, then the pleasant experience of a fulfilled or satisfied desire is simply the experience of being without the pain of lack. And so mental or emotional pleasure is nothing other than the absence of pain, specifically the absence of the pain of lack. In the mental or emotional realm,

then, just as in the realm of the flesh, there is no neutral state between pain and positive pleasure. There is only pain and its absence.

A more dramatic argument Epicurus gives to the conclusion that there is no neutral state between mental pleasure and mental pain is this: Imagine that something you prize dearly is at risk (your life, say, or your good name, or your daughter's life). Now imagine that the threat has passed, and that what you prize dearly is still yours. You will agree, Epicurus says, that nothing could be more pleasant than that, that is, than not losing that which you prize dearly. But now notice: you've had that which you prize dearly all along—before, during and after the time it was at risk. You are pleased to have it now, now that the risk to it has passed, but that means that you must have been just as pleased to have it before it was at risk. And so you were not in a neutral state with regard to it before it was at risk. You were enjoying it all along.

2) The second leg of the tripod on which rests the directive to limit one's desires to those that one needs to have in order to live is the contention that the happy life is simply the life of pleasure. There is nothing more to living happily than living in pleasure. Pleasant experiences are the atoms; when they predominate over painful experiences in a stretch of life, then the person is living happily over that stretch of his life.

3) Finally, Epicurus insists that it is easy to find pleasure in life. One experiences pleasure simply in not experiencing pain, in experiencing neither bodily pain nor the pain of lack stemming from unfulfilled desires. The trick, then, to living happily is to avoid, and to continue to avoid, pain. We will avoid pain if our body is well and our desires are satisfied. To keep one's body well, all one needs to do is to remain free from disease, injury and fatigue. This is easy to do: eat healthfully, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, floss and brush, avoid those suffering from contagious illnesses. Now it is obvious enough, when we turn to the question of avoiding the pain of lack, that the trick here is to desire only that which one can easily attain. And, it turns out, that which we need to desire if we are to keep ourselves alive is easy to obtain. (Potatoes are cheap

and keep well, a lean-to will keep one warm and dry.) On the other hand, desires for more than what one needs in order to live are often difficult to satisfy, and for that reason can be sources of anxiety and anguish, in addition to the pain of lack that they bring.

And so, if one aims to be happy, one would best limit one's desires to those things one needs in order to live. Since the things one needs in order to live are easy to obtain, one will experience little of the pain of lack that attends desires for things difficult to obtain. Since satisfying a desire removes the pain of lack, and pleasure consists entirely in the absence of pain, pursuing things easy to obtain will bring one pleasure. Finally, since a happy life is simply a pleasure-filled life, pursuing only those things easy to obtain will bring one happiness.

Moreover, the pleasure of satisfying one or another unnecessary desire is rarely worth the bodily or mental pain that can follow upon it. (Drinking brings hangovers and embarrassment, sex brings disease, children, emotional commitments, and embarrassment.)

Pleasure is merely the absence of pain, and so is all of a kind and does not admit of degrees, but pain comes both in degrees and in different kinds. Epicurus discusses two kinds of mental or emotional pain in addition to the pain of lack, either of which can attend that pain. First, there is the pain of anxiety. A person who desires something experiences anxiety when he comes to believe—that is, when he comes to fear—that he might not satisfy his desire. Perhaps he worries that he lacks the resources to attain his end, or that, despite his adequate resources, fortune is against him. Second, there is the pain of anguish. A person who desires something experiences anguish when he comes to believe that he will not satisfy his desire. Perhaps he concludes that his resources are in fact too meagre to do the job. Or perhaps the crucial moment has passed and will not come again. For Epicurus, then, mental pain is, first of all, the pain of lack; but on top of the pain of lack we sometimes also experience the pain of anxiety or the pain of anguish.

The second directive, to be simple and plain in matters of taste, or, alternatively, not to acquire subtle, refined or discriminating tastes, is also grounded on Epicurus's concern that

difficult to satisfy desires are avoidable sources of pain. An unsophisticated person of simple tastes will be a person who tends to find what she encounters to her liking. A person of refined taste is less easily satisfied.

Let us consider two people, one whose tastes in food, clothes, art, literature, pastimes, and companions are simple and unrefined, and who has few desires for anything more than what is needed to keep a person alive and healthy, the other who has refined tastes and who desires many luxurious things. Let us suppose that each happens to be physically healthy and strong, and that each has all that he or she wants. If Epicurus is right that pleasure is merely the absence of pain and the happy life is just the life of pleasure, then the person of simple tastes and few desires is just as happy as the person of refined tastes and many desires. Both are sound in body and satisfied in mind, so neither is living more pleasantly than the other. And yet the first, Epicurus would note, is living more wisely than the second. Chances are much greater in the case of the first that he will continue to live pleasantly. The second is living at risk of falling into pain. Because the first is content with little, the first is likely to remain content tomorrow and the next day, while the second, because he is not easily satisfied, may well become discontented tomorrow or the next day.

A common view is that it is more rewarding to satisfy a subtle and refined taste than to satisfy a broad or vulgar taste. One gets more pleasure from hearing a good performance of one of Beethoven's late quartets than from hearing a sea shanty, pleasant as the latter can be. And so, one might suppose, wisdom could well instruct one to develop one's tastes as a means of maximizing expected utility, so long as the circumstances one finds oneself in do not make it unlikely for one's new refined tastes ever to find satisfaction. Epicurus, importantly, says not that the chance of satisfying refined tastes is too low for wisdom often to counsel the strategy of developing one's tastes. He says, rather, that the payoff in the two cases is the same. Thus he concludes that wisdom must always counsel one against sophistication. You can be as happy as

possible listening to country and western music and talking about the weather, and your happiness will never be put at risk.

Much of Epicurus's instruction in the art of living consists in exposing our fears as groundless. Fear is, of course, one of the great impediments to living happily. Fear is the source of anxiety, and anxiety robs us of pleasure. Epicurus is concerned with at least six sources of fear. One is the fear that one's resources will be inadequate to serve one's desires. We saw above that Epicurus advises us to limit our desires to that which we need to live, which is to say that he advises us to live simply. Since that which we need to live is cheap and plentiful and easy to obtain, if we want only what we need to live, we will not fear that we will one day have to go without. We can face the world with a confident expectation that we will continue to find what we need to live, and thus with a confident expectation of happiness. Another is the fear that we are out of touch with the world, that we don't really understand it or know what is going on around us. This is the fear that our beliefs are all merely opinions, based on training or convention rather than experience or reason, no better from the point of view of reason than their negations. To this fear Epicurus opposes his anti-sceptical epistemology. According to Epicurus, there is a basic level of awareness at which things are just as they seem to be. Above this level, he says, it certainly is possible to be mistaken, but this fact should not worry us. It should not worry us for, on the one hand, we are able, if we pay careful attention to what is going on in our minds, to assign particular beliefs fairly objective degrees of credibility, according to how distant they are from our baseline beliefs and the logical or evidential principles by which we generated them from these beliefs. On the other hand, any false belief we have that can make a difference to our experience is a belief we can infirm in experience through testing, while any false belief that will not make a difference to our experience cannot harm us. Finally, says Epicurus, when it comes to explanatory hypotheses, one should favour over the other neither one of any two that conflict, so long as both save the appearances equally well. Theories are tools for coping with the world, and

so all that can matter is how well the tool works. A third fear is the fear of debilitating physical pain, the pain caused by accident or disease or old age. First of all, Epicurus says, the prudent person will avoid that which tends to result in accidents or disease. But second, Epicurus insists, for the most part excruciating physical pain is short lived while chronic pain can be put up with. Excruciating physical pain does rob us of happiness, but it soon passes and happiness is again possible. Chronic pain need not rob us of happiness at all, for we are able to experience many pleasures even as we suffer it. A fourth fear is the fear that we are mere consciousnesses detached from our actions, that the true source of our actions is necessity, not our conscious wills. To this fear Epicurus opposes his doctrine that sometimes atoms swerve, which implies that not all that happens happens of necessity. A fifth fear is the fear of the gods, specifically the fear that we will upset them. We wish not to upset them, of course, either because we fear what they might do to us or simply because we love them and, for that reason, their good opinion of us matters to us. But the gods, Epicurus reminds us, are unsurpassably happy, for they live entirely trouble-free lives. They cannot, then, wish us either good or ill, for that would imply that they are affected and, hence, potentially troubled by us. The gods must be entirely indifferent to us, at least apart from their overall love of being. We are, of course, right to love the gods, but only because they are beings whose blessed lives we are to emulate as far as we can. A sixth fear is the fear of death. With death we are no more; thus, it is no more sensible to fear death than to fear not having existed before our conception.

To live happily, Epicurus advises, fear only that which is genuinely frightening. As it turns out, very little is genuinely frightening.

We avoid pain by avoiding politics and society, says Epicurus, for we cannot hope in such realms of competition and intrigue not to put much that matters to us at risk. In any case, those who are content with the simple life find no attraction at all in politics or society. Again, Epicurus rejects the rejoinder that the rewards of the political life or of social life can make it worthwhile to

take the risks that living these lives demand. The rewards possible in such lives, he says, can be no greater than those possible in lives that involve less risk.