

To live a happy life...

I. Epicurus says that to live a happy life, one should:

1. Desire to have only that which one needs in order to live.

—Live simply.

2. Be plain and indiscriminating in matters of taste.

—Do not cultivate subtle or refined tastes.

3. Save for a rainy day.

4. Fear only that which is genuinely frightening.

—You have no reason to fear:*

a) physical pain

b) that you lack the resources needed for living happily

c) that you are out of touch with reality

d) that you are not the source of your actions

e) the gods

f) death

5. Be on good terms with people.

—Respect social conventions in order to avoid offending or upsetting others.

6. Avoid politics and society.

—Support, but not energetically, the rule of law and public welfare. Be at peace with the laws of your land, but cautiously intervene on the side of justice should an opportunity arise to improve the laws. Take no side in (take no notice of) conflicts that do not affect you. (Troubled by Palestinian terror or Israeli injustice? What=s it matter to you here in Halifax?)

7. Forge and maintain a few, but only a few, good friendships.

Epicurus says:

Follow the above seven directives and you will lead a happy life, however the world happens to turn.

Fail to follow them and whatever little happiness you manage to find will have come your way entirely by luck.

II. Two proposed paths to happiness that Epicurus rejects.

One will best find true happiness by:

1. Seeking to perfect oneself by developing one's talents and cultivating one's tastes.

—A person able to play guitar well derives more happiness from playing the guitar well than a person of middling abilities does from playing the guitar merely competently.

—A person able to appreciate Beethoven's late quartets derives more happiness from listening to them than anyone is able to derive from listening to Britney Spears.

2. Seeking to be a good person, the sort of person who by habit or principle does the right thing for ethically sound reasons.

—A person concerned to do the right thing for ethically sound reasons forges an intimate connection to what is truly valuable. In doing so, she gains a certain distance from herself and, perhaps paradoxically, thereby finds serenity and joy.

Epicurus advises us to abandon these paths. Both are more trouble than they are worth. Worse, to walk either of them is to set oneself up for frustration and disappointment.

III. Epicurus on pleasure and the relation between pleasure and happiness.

1. Pleasure is merely the absence of pain.

—A pleasant experience is merely a painless experience.

a) Bodily pleasure is merely the absence of bodily pain.

—It's pleasant to be healthy and fit, but health and fitness are merely the absence of illness, injury and fatigue, and these are painful.

b) Mental or emotional pleasure is merely the absence of mental or emotional pain.

—Mental or emotional pain is, first of all, the pain of lack, of not having what one wants. To get what one wants is to remove that pain. Pleasure is simply the absence of that pain.

Epicurus rejects the view that there is an affectively neutral state between pain and pleasure.

To see that Epicurus is right that pleasure is merely the absence of pain, imagine two people, one of talent and refined sensibilities, the other simple and plain.

Now imagine that each has what she wants: the first person is able to exercise her talent and to satisfy her discriminating tastes; the second person has only the plain and simple fare she needs.

Which of the two is experiencing more pleasure?

The answer: each is experiencing as much pleasure as the other; indeed, each is experiencing pleasure to the fullest.

Which of the two is wisest?

The answer: the second, for she is much more likely than the first to continue to experience pleasure in its fullness.

2. A happy life is simply a life in which there is more pleasure than pain. The more pleasant experiences in one's life, the happier one is.

3. The trick to living a happy life is the trick of enjoying pleasant experiences now under the confident expectation that one will enjoy pleasant experiences tomorrow and tomorrow after that.

—Given that pleasure is merely the absence of pain and that the happy life is merely the pleasant life, Epicurus's seven directives are both necessary and sufficient for living a happy life.

—The happy life is simply the trouble-free life. Epicurus's directives are both necessary and sufficient for living a trouble-free life.

IV. A digression: Epicurus and the Stoics on trouble in mind.

1. Epicurus says:

a) to desire something is necessarily to suffer the pain of lack.

b) to fear that one will not attain that which one desires is necessarily to suffer the pain of anxiety.

c) to believe that one will not attain that which one desires is necessarily to suffer the pain of anguish.

—The source of mental or emotional pain is desire.

—To live simply—to limit one's desires to what one needs to live—is to minimize the pain of lack and to eliminate anxiety and anguish.

2. The Stoics say:

No one suffers the pain of lack or anxiety or anguish who understands:

i) that whether one satisfies one's desire is a matter of how the wheels of necessity turn;

ii) that the wheels of necessity turn always for the best.

—So desire away! The source of pain is ego and misunderstanding. To understand that whatever happens happens by way of providence is to live without anxiety or anguish.

3. A caution:

The stoics reject inquiry into the art of living as beside the point. One ought to be indifferent toward one's happiness. One is to live virtuously for the sake of virtue. (Because the universe is providential and the virtuous are worthy of happiness, the virtuous will be happy. But this thought must play no role in one's coming to virtue.)

4. Who is right on this matter?

Epicurus or the Stoics? Epicurus says that, given that we desire something, it is not up to us whether we experience the pain of lack or of anxiety or of anguish. The Stoics say that it is up to us: we can be apathetic toward that which we desire, and thus escape emotional pain whatever happens.

Is neither Epicurus nor the Stoics right? Then what are the sources of mental or emotional pain? What is and what isn't within our control to avoid?

V. Facing Epicurus's challenge.

Do you take seriously your own happiness?

Why, then, are you concerned to develop your talents, to cultivate your tastes, and to promote and to honour kindness, justice and the rest?

Where has Epicurus gone wrong?

Or is your own happiness just one of the things you value for its own sake?

But how could it make sense for you to value anything even on a par with your own happiness—let alone to value it above your own happiness?

*Why do you have no reason to fear these things? Here are sketches of Epicurus's arguments.

a) You have no reason to fear being in physical pain, for excruciating pain is short lived while chronic pain can be tolerated. And much physical pain can be avoided easily through a healthful diet, exercise, and rest.

b) You have no reason to fear poverty, for anything that you need in order to live happily is cheap and easy to obtain. You will always be able to find beans and rice to eat and enough discarded lumber with which to build a lean-to.

c) You have no reason to fear that you are out of touch with reality, for scepticism is false and certainty is possible. Our senses are well adapted to our environments and it's easy to

distinguish beliefs that are merely speculative from beliefs that are reasonable, and the latter from beliefs that are certainly true.

d) You have no reason to fear that you are not the source of your actions, for you have the capacity to act freely. You are not merely a conduit through which forces external to you work their ways.

e) You have no reason to fear the gods, for the gods don't care one way or the other about you. The gods are supremely happy beings, which means they are without worry. Nothing you could possibly do will either please or anger them.

f) You have no reason to fear death, for death is simply nonbeing; thus, when death is, you are not, and when you are, death is not.