

EPICUREAN RENAISSANCE
REDISCOVERING THE ART OF GOOD LIVING

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We are, by nature, discontent.

Humankind has come a long way since our ancestors branched off to become the species that we call human. We mastered fire; invented agriculture; built shelters, then cities, great pyramids, then skyscrapers; we developed mass production, conquered diseases, changed the courses of rivers, spanned the waters, navigated Earth's seas, then the atmosphere and beyond. We discovered the laws of nature and we split the atom. We have peered out to the edge of the universe and to the beginning of time, and we have seen into the interior of the atom. We have killed off most of the wild animals and domesticated others. We have *almost* mastered the world -- but have we mastered ourselves?

We have comfortable homes, warm clothes, rapid transportation, rich food, a variety of intoxicants, pain killers, sleep inducers, entertainments available 24 by 7 on 300 channels, comedy, drama, music, and art, with sex sprinkled over all -- we *ought* to be very happy. The only problem: people are not. Evidence abounds. We lead the world in alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, road rage, tranquilizer consumption, obesity -- just a few of the indicators that we don't feel happy.

The problem is, discontent is built into human nature. Our ancestors' sense of discontent led to all these achievements: discontent with cold fostered our inventions of fire, clothing, shelter, and hot baths. Discontent with hunger fostered our inventions of agriculture and fishing industries and cookbooks. Discontent with boredom led to our inventions of music, drama, and religion. Discontent with ignorance fostered our pursuit of discovery. We need the new, the novel. *Our persistent discontent makes us think we are unhappy.* Mark Twain's character Sam Bartlett said: "Happiness ain't a thing in itself -- it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant.... And so, as soon as the novelty is over and the force of the contrast dulled, it ain't happiness any longer, and you have to get something fresh."

The happiness dilemma

So, we search for happiness. How many self-help books are written about *how* to be happy? Books, magazines, and TV programs tell us

- "how to find the perfect man or woman,"
 - "how to improve your golf game,"
 - "how to make money in the stock market,"
 - "how to improve your sex life,"
 - "how to become beautiful,"
 - "how to make your home beautiful,"
- and on and on.

We seem to think, and popular culture would have us believe that *happiness* can be achieved and maintained if we can be rich, or be beautiful or handsome, or be loved by the right man or woman, or to have beautiful clothing and jewelry, or to have a beautiful home, or be the perfect hostess or host, or to excel over others in sports, or to possess a luxurious and powerful vehicle, or to have novel sexual encounters, or to have our team win the championship, or for some, to acquire the ultimate drug that makes one feel good and be oblivious to unhappiness and the world, ... the list goes on. And, clearly it is implied that *ultimate happiness* is attained by multiple attainments in this vein -- all of the above -- the more the happier. A friend of mine has a poster in his office that reads: "He who dies with the most toys wins."

Even while caught up in this endless chase, we have a suspicion that all of this acquisition and seeking for pleasure is not really going to bring us happiness. In our most lucid moments we realize that we are letting ourselves be driven by popular but irrational culture. What we feel at the gut level is frustration – you just can't get to that perfectly happy place from here. John Stuart Mill wrote: "Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so."

In our daily lives we have constant examples of this dilemma.

- When we are hungry, food satisfies us and makes us feel happy. When we feel unhappy we try eating more food, but then eating more doesn't make us happy. Finally we become aware that we are unhappy because we overeat and ruin our health.
- When we enjoy a glass of wine we feel good. If we want to keep that feeling we drink more – until we find we are unhappy because we drink too much.
- Ken Nordine used to do a wonderful skit about the unhappy guy who goes to the psychiatrist because he is addicted to TV.
"Why do you watch so much TV?" the psychiatrist asks.
"Because TV makes me *happy*."
"Then what is your problem?"
"I watch too much TV."

Answers to the 'happiness dilemma' have been around for over two millennia

We are not the first to recognize the *happiness* dilemma. After our prehistoric ancestors began to live more abundant lives through the development of agriculture and the building of cities, and they had more time on their hands to think about their lives, they started asking – and answering these questions about who we are, where we came from, and how we should live. Perhaps coincidentally, it was in the centuries around 500 - 100 BCE that these philosophical questions were being addressed incisively in several separate regions of the civilizing world,

- In Asia by Confucius and Lao-tzu, resulting in Confucianism and Taoism
- In South Asia by the Buddha and the elaboration of Buddhism
- And at about the same time in the Mediterranean littoral by the Greek philosophers. Some of their concepts were later woven into some Christian traditions.

Epicurus was one of those philosophers; a prolific author who formed a school of philosophy that came to be known, appropriately, as The Garden. Epicurus' philosophy concerns precisely the questions posed above about happiness and how we can find it. In our search for happiness today, I believe we have much to learn from Epicurus and those other ancient philosophers.

Who was Epicurus? Epicurus was born in Greece in the third year of the 109th Olympiad on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion, seven years after the death of Plato. That translates to February 4th, 341 BCE on the Christian calendar. Epicurus began to study philosophy seriously at age twelve and he started his own school of philosophy, The Garden, at age 32. He lived his whole life in Greece, most of it in Athens. At age 72 he died, calmly, as he had taught his followers. Having acquired a fatal kidney disorder, one day he got in a bronze hot-tub, asked for a glass of wine, bid his friends farewell, asked them to remember his doctrines, and died.

Apart from his philosophy of living, Epicurus was a genius with great foresight in other disciplines. He made astute observations about the nature of the universe that have only been rediscovered in modern times. In *cosmology*, he regarded the universe as infinite and eternal and as consisting only of bodies (or

matter) and space. Of substances, he wrote that some are compound and some are indivisible atoms from which the compounds are formed, anticipating 20th century *chemistry* and *atomic physics*. In *biology*, Epicurus anticipated the concept of natural selection, contending that natural forces give rise to organisms of different types and that only the types able to support and propagate themselves survive. In *psychology* Epicurus teachings anticipated our modern beliefs that discount super-natural forces (devils) controlling our actions.

When we hear *Epicurean* today we think first of food and wine. According to the dictionary, an *epicure* has come to mean a person with refined taste, especially in food and wine; or a person devoted to sensuous pleasure and luxurious living – hedonism. *What an irony!* As we shall see, Epicureans in reality took the opposite approach in their prescription for happiness and were devoted to simple food, watered-down wine, and simple living. Epicurus himself would strongly have disapproved of rich and complex “gourmet” foods. It is additional irony that the word *gourmet* comes from *gourmond* or glutton – the opposite of what Epicurus taught.

Epicurus wrote many books detailing his philosophy. Epicureanism, regarded the purpose of human life as the attainment of pleasure – this is where contemporary minds associate Epicurean with Gourmet. But what Epicurus meant by pleasure was contentment and peace of mind in a frugal life – not hedonism.

Epicurus' philosophy

Here is the gist of the philosophy that Epicurus founded. Epicurus wrote that if we have happiness, we have everything. If we do not have happiness, all of our actions are directed toward attaining it. Therefore we need to understand what happiness is so that we can know whether we have it or not.

Then he asked, *why* don't we know if we are happy or not. The answer, he said, is because we are surrounded by a culture that gives us constant, powerful messages of what we need to be happy. We let others define happiness for us. (Does this sound familiar?) To quote Epicurus:

- “The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity.” And later,
- “Of our desires some are natural and necessary, others are natural but not necessary; and others are neither natural nor necessary, but are due to groundless opinion.”

We recognize this as consumerism, or slavery to fashion. This phenomenon has been analyzed more closely over the ages and in the 20th century it was defined in economic terms as the difference in acquiring basic goods versus status goods. In a reasonably prosperous society basic goods like food and shelter are relatively easy to obtain. On our trip to the remote mountains of Myanmar the people we encountered were generally adequately fed and clothed – and seemed as happy as any cross-section of Americans I know, if not more so. Once people have the basic needs, there arises an apparent social necessity to acquire status goods that are priced by their scarcity – antiques, works of art, fashion by particular designers, high-status real estate, and so on. Watching TV commercials is an exercise in seeing all the things you “must have” to enjoy higher status and be happy. At the extreme, Ferrari's latest limited-edition model, selling for \$675,000 was recently eagerly ordered by a 50-year-old banker in Washington, D.C. His pleasure will not be that he will have the capability to drive at more than 200 miles per hour on the beltway. His pleasure will be that he will possess what others can not. He expects happiness.

So for an Epicurean --what, then, is happiness and what are its sources? I will discuss five.

Epicurus' first source of happiness -- have no fear or anxiety. No fear from what?

- Have no fear of death. Epicurus wrote: Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us...death is [merely] the privation of all sentience...a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable ... by taking away the yearning for immortality. ... Foolish is the man who says he fears death, not because it will pain him when it comes but because it pains him in the prospect. *When we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not*"
- Have no fear of myths or the supernatural. Epicurus wrote: "The chief cause of human misery is religion." In contemporary terms we would note that much religion thrives on inducing fear and guilt. Epicurus taught us not to fear the gods; men invented them. People today who finally accept that there is not some big judgement day and punishment awaiting them after death express a great psychological relief from anxiety.
- Have no anxiety about the lack of status goods. Reject outside messages that advise you what you need to be happy.

Epicurus' second source of happiness is cultivating friendship. Epicurus wrote: "Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship." His follower Laertius wrote: "A wise man will die for a friend."

The third source of happiness is health. Eat, drink, and exercise to maintain good health.

- Epicurus advised us to "...direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquility of mind."
- Or this idea is attributed to Albert Schweitzer: "Happiness consists of good health and a poor memory."
- George Bernard Shaw wrote: "Give a man health and a course to steer and he'll never stop to trouble about whether he's happy or not."

Fourth is to consider the relationship between pleasure and happiness. Here is what Epicurus wrote to Menoecus about pleasure:

"We call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good." ... "While therefore all pleasure ... to us is good, not all pleasure should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned." ... "When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation." [Apparently Epicurean pleasure was misunderstood even in his day.] "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the ground of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul."

Epicurus' fifth source of happiness is: the importance of reason; living what we call an 'examined life.' Epicurus wrote: "Of all this, the beginning and the greatest good is wisdom. Therefore wisdom is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them."

Summing up his concept of achieving happiness, Epicurus wrote:

"Exercise yourself in these and related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with one who is like-minded; then never, either in waking or in dream, will you be disturbed, but will live as a god among men. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings."

We have many examples of how Epicurus' common sense philosophy comes into play in our lives.

- Most memorable meal of my youth: Potato soup (fishing trip anecdote.)
- Spanish enjoyment of coffee (C.A.F.E. – caliente, amargo, fuerte, y escaso.)

I find it very interesting that *Buddhism*, developed during the same era, extols the same keys to happiness. The Noble Truths of Buddhism proclaim that

1. Life is suffering.
2. All suffering is caused by craving. Our wants are a bottomless pit. And
3. Suffering can be overcome and happiness attained by giving up useless craving and restless wanting.

During the same era the Hindu world developed a similar philosophy that we call Yoga. (Discuss the Yoga Path.)

It is interesting also that the *Christian writers* of the New Testament, Romans generally conversant with Hellenist philosophies, incorporated Epicurean concepts into their writing of the Bible. Note the strong Epicurean flavor of this passage attributed to Jesus. (Read Luke 12: 22-30; 33.)

What does all this mean to us? Although we have more material comforts, more entertaining diversions, more opportunities for travel, more cures for diseases, more of almost everything than man has ever had before, our culture is afflicted by anxieties, stresses, and worries as troublesome as at any time in history. But Epicurus' philosophy is as relevant for us today as it was when he taught it in The Garden some 2,400 years ago.

Yes, it is easy for me to say: "seek pleasure by simplifying your life," "make do with, and enjoy, the necessities," "don't worry about death," "live one day at a time," "don't accept guilt and don't worry about 'Judgement Day,'" "give your health a high priority," "live according to reason and wisdom," but we all have trouble *practicing* what we know is best for us. For me, the idea of self-respect helps. When I do the thing I know to be good, I respect myself more. When I don't do the good thing I am disappointed in myself.

There is a subtle danger in consciously striving to live according to these high principles. We must avoid anxiety about not measuring up, about not being perfect. We should seek Epicurus' path in a relaxed and non-judgmental way. We should not focus on being perfect, nor on others' imperfection. Most of us find people who think they are "perfect" boring. In *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell cites the writing of Thomas Mann who named love the controlling principle of his art.

Perfection in life does not exist; and if it did, it would be – not lovable but admirable, possibly even a bore. Perfection lacks personality. ... What is lovable about any human being is precisely his imperfections.

So have no anxiety about your imperfections. They are what make you lovable. But perhaps recalling that Epicurus has been a good model for over two thousand years will inspire us live in a way that we permit ourselves to experience true happiness. (Whether we know we are happy or not.)

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