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To Avoid Pain or Die Trying: A Philosophical interpretation of Epicureanism

KRISTEN BEARD

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The school of Epicureanism promotes a philosophy based on hedonism, arguing that pleasantness constitutes goodness. Thus the goal of life is to pursue pleasure. For the Epicureans, the highest pleasure is simply the total absence of pain, and nothing more. Mental pains are much more powerful than physical ones, so the best way to maximize pleasure is to abandon mental pains. Traditional interpretation of Epicurean text says that the primary mental pain that burdens human pleasure is fear, especially the fear of death. Further, humans can eliminate their fear completely by evaluating it with rational discourse. I argue, however, against this traditional interpretation. I interpret the Epicurean texts to hold that fear cannot be eliminated completely: based on Epicurean texts, fear results when basic needs such as food, water, and shelter become threatened.

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The Epicureans are typically understood to hold the belief that people can free themselves of fear through the use of reason¹. I argue against this: according to Epicurean text, even the wisest Epicurean is vulnerable to fear in threatening environments. I will first summarize briefly the main structure of my argument.

My argument will have three premises and one conclusion that logically follows. Each premise is simply a belief that I attribute to Epicureans, which I take to be uncontroversial. Taken together they result in a belief that is more controversial, which I argue should be attributed to the Epicurean doctrine of beliefs in order to maintain logical coherence. The first premise is that people must live with what Epicureans call “natural and necessary” desire; second is that threat to such natural and necessary desire results in fear; and third is that certain external circumstances can present threats to natural and necessary desire. It follows from these premises that fear can detract from the tranquil state of even the perfectly trained Epicurean in certain circumstances.

Emily Austin comes to this same conclusion in her paper “The Politics of Fearing Death”. However, she and I disagree on one key aspect: Austin argues on behalf of the Epicureans that humans cannot let go of certain desires because of their natural and necessary aversion to death. On the other hand, I argue that Epicureans see natural and necessary desires as rooted in an aversion to pain according to their texts. I defend my claim that Epicureans are not averse to death in itself, and that they are averse to pain in itself. Then I address Austin’s primary objection to my argument.

To explain each premise a bit further, the first premise is that there are some desires—those that the Epicureans consider “natural and necessary”—that every person must strive to fulfill. This just means that people necessarily desire the basic materials they need to survive, like food, water, and shelter. Necessary desires are the exception to the Epicurean philosophy that desiring things should be avoided in general. They hold that unfulfilled desire is the source of all pain², so to minimize unfulfilled desire (and therefore pain), one should minimize desire altogether. The Epicureans are hedonists, so avoidance of pain is the core foundation of their philosophy. My first premise states that one cannot rid themselves of natural and necessary desires, and thus they must strive to fulfill them. The following examples from Epicurean texts support this first premise of my argument.

First the Principle Doctrine (PD) 29³ reads, “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.” Further, the *Letter to Menoeceus* lists the following reasons why some desires are necessary: “Some are necessary for happiness, some for the freedom of disturbance of the body, and some for life itself” (p. 127-8). Basic needs are necessary for all three of these things. To desire these things is an essential, instinctual part of any person, such that one believes the desire *must* be fulfilled.

The second premise of my argument is that the prospect of not fulfilling this *type* of desire results in fear. I define fear as unpleasant thoughts caused by the anticipation of unpleasant things to come⁴. It is impossible to reason oneself out of this kind of fear. Arguably, there are two potential ways to reason oneself out of fear in general:

(1) Realize that the anticipated thing causing fear is not actually unpleasant. In this case there is nothing unpleasant to fuel the unpleasant thoughts. However, this type of reasoning does not work on unfulfilled desire, as it is the sole cause of pain for Epicureans, as reported above, and therefore necessarily unpleasant.

(2) Realize that fear does not help one to avoid or prevent the unpleasant thing from occurring. In this case it is not reasonable to have fear, since it makes the situation more unpleasant, and the wise Epicurean could train herself to stop having the unpleasant thoughts. However, this is not the case with regard to basic needs because fear is functional—it helps the Epicurean (or any person, for that matter) to fulfill her needs in difficult situations.

I would like to defend this point further, that fear is advantageous for survival. Humans

are equipped with biological mechanisms to help us fulfill essential desires, but they often require an element of fear to motivate one to act. Take the case of someone not having drinkable water, for instance; fear induced by natural and necessary desire for water would likely lead them to find a solution. In most cases, fear will subside after the natural and necessary desire is satisfied, and it enables one to go on to experience pleasure that more than outweighs the mental unpleasantness that it caused. While fear may not always succeed in allowing one to avoid danger, the rational agent will still accept the risk since it will most likely succeed.

The advantages of fulfilling natural and necessary desire—future opportunities to attain and enjoy the mindset of a sage—are very likely to outweigh the unpleasantness incurred from fear of not having basic needs met. So even the most rational Epicurean will fear the prospect of failing to meet basic needs if she thinks it is likely to happen.

Traditional interpretation that fear can be fully eliminated with reasoning relies on the fact that natural and necessary desires are usually very easy to fulfill (PD 26). In the case that they are, there is nothing unpleasant to realistically anticipate. But there are certain circumstances in which they are not, which brings me to my final premise.

My third premise is that practically speaking, it is possible for the Epicurean to get caught in a dangerous situation. Based on the last premise, the Epicurean would anticipate the unpleasantness of her unsatisfied natural and necessary desire.

So if we accept these three premises—that Epicureans cannot rid themselves of natural and necessary desire; that threat to natural and necessary desire results in fear; and that certain external circumstances can present threats to natural and necessary desire—it logically follows that fear can affect even the perfectly-trained Epicurean in certain circumstances. The Epicurean sage does not eliminate fear from her life completely, and this is intentional. This is partly because fear is good to have since it is advantageous for survival when one is in danger.

This conclusion differs from traditional interpretations of Epicurean texts, which claim that fear is based on false beliefs, and so one can eliminate fear with proper reasoning regardless of circumstance. If the sage wants to rid herself of fear completely, she needs to live in a secure environment, hence why the Epicureans encourage people to live in small communities of friends and refrain from engaging in politics (PD 14). But the trouble is that this last caveat is not typically added as a necessary part of the Epicurean doctrine. We should therefore report the Epicureans as offering a method for developing a tranquil mindset, adding the qualification: only in circumstances where basic needs are sure to be met.

Emily Austin comes to an almost identical conclusion—the sage is vulnerable to fear in unstable environments, but that one can compensate for it by living in a peaceful community. However, Austin and I disagree about the motivation behind this fear. She argues that Epicureans concern themselves with natural and necessary desire because they want to avoid death (Austin, p. 121-27). But I argue that they want to avoid pain, and that the rational Epicurean does not fear death in itself. To fear “death in itself” is to fear only the “dying” aspect of death, independent from the painful experience or social consequences that may accompany death. I will first return briefly to an earlier point—that an aversion to pain motivates fulfillment of basic desires, and then address a major objection from Austin: the Epicurean’s apparent aversion to painless death.

As said above, aversion to pain is the foundation for all Epicurean philosophy; they identify as hedonists, for whom pleasure is the ultimate good for which all things are valuable and pain detracts from value in the same way. This alone provides sufficient evidence to conclude that Epicureans avoid dangerous situations, at least in part, for the sake of avoiding a painful experience. So fear that results from dangerous situations is caused by the Epicurean’s aversion to pain.

In order to argue that it is actually an aversion to death that instigates fear, Austin presents examples of certain behaviors of Epicureans and attributes them to an aversion to death (Austin, p.121-27). One of her main arguments is that Epicureans would avoid death, even if it were painless. I will counter this argument by explaining why the sage would avoid painless death,

even though she is not averse to death in itself.

I concede that Epicureans would avoid painless death. As Austin points out, Epicureans are not indifferent to someone going around and killing everyone painlessly, and they would choose to leave town if a tyrant were coming to mass-murder them painlessly in their sleep (Austin, p.122). So what can account for this behavior if not an aversion to death itself?

My response: the aversion that an Epicurean displays towards death can be explained by a natural, but not necessary, desire to continue living. The tranquil Epicurean sage enjoys life and desires to continue living. Even so, there are multiple Epicurean texts that suggest that the desire to live after one has attained sagehood is not actually necessary. I offer examples below that indicate the sage would enjoy life, but she would not be averse to the prospect of losing it. If my argument holds, the pleasure of life is enough motivation for her to actively avoid painless deaths without thinking of them as unpleasant affairs.

The texts that support this include the *Letter to Menoeceus* (Epicurus, Inwood, Gerson 4.126):

“But the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad. And just as he does not unconditionally choose the largest amount of food but the most pleasant food, so he savours not the longest time but the most pleasant.”

We see that for Epicurus, quantity of life does not matter, and he would willingly sacrifice quantity for quality in general.

Other supporting texts are *Principle Doctrines* 18, 19, and 20. They collectively teach that a long span of time will provide an equal amount of pleasure as will a short span for a sage. The Epicurean sage might have less variation of pleasure by dying shortly after achieving a tranquil mindset, but she would not be deprived of any *amount* of pleasure.

Lucretius also supports this claim in *On the Nature of Things*:

“If your past life has been a boon, and if not all your blessings have flowed straight through you and run to waste like water poured into a riddled vessel, why, you fool, do you not retire from the feast of life like a satisfied guest and with equanimity resign yourself to undisturbed rest? If, however, all your enjoyments have been poured away and lost, and if life is a thorn, why do you seek to prolong your existence, when the future, just as surely as the past, would be ruined and utterly wasted? Why not rather put an end to life and trouble?” (p. 92-3).

Indeed, Lucretius seems to say at the beginning of this quote that if one is satisfied with life, one should “quit while he is ahead”, and end it at a point when one is filled with pleasure before anything bad happens. He then goes on to advise the reader to end one’s life if it is not going so well, for the future undoubtedly holds the same miseries for that person. Lucretius’s advice seems to reveal a thorough indifference to a continued life in itself.

Finally, Philodemus’s *On Death* also helps this argument. According to Tsouna’s *The Ethics of Philodemus*,

“His treatment of that fear is grounded on the theses that if one understands the limits of pleasure, a small amount of time naturally suffices in order to produce it (De mort. III. 33–6), and that the flesh very quickly achieves as much pleasure as can be provided by an infinite time (III. 37–9)” (p. 256).

It seems clear from these texts that the continuation of life is a natural but unnecessary desire for the Epicurean sage; she does not fear threats to her life, but she does fear threats to her state of pleasure. She enjoys life, but prioritizes pleasure over all things, including life.

So the prospect of ending one’s life does not bring about unpleasant thoughts for the Epicurean, though she does enjoy life while it lasts. Such pleasures are objects of natural and *unnecessary* desire in the texts⁵. In other words, if the sage’s desire to live is encroaching on her pleasant mindset, she will gladly relinquish the desire completely, as long life presents no actual benefit for the Epicurean beyond sagehood⁶.

So the sage does not see painless deaths as harmful but he still has a motivation to avoid

them for the sake of pleasure experienced in life. Therefore Austin's primary objection fails to prove that death is the motivating factor in fulfilling desire.

To conclude, Austin and I agree that Epicureans are vulnerable to fear when they come into dangerous circumstances that threaten their basic needs. But this fear results from an aversion to pain, as Epicureans do not see death as harmful.

Notes

1 For instance James Warren argues for the interpretation that the fear of death is irrational, and it can be eradicated by engaging in rational discourse and altering one's false value judgments (page 7-8).

2 Principle Doctrines 21 and 26 advocate reducing one's desire as a primary method of avoiding pain; Text 141 in the Inwood and Gerson translation provides further support, discussing emotional pain from unpleasant thoughts, which also arises from unfulfilled desire.

3 References to Principle Doctrines and Letter to Menoeceus are taken from Inwood and Gerson translation.

4 One could argue that fear so defined is an anachronism that matches modern conceptions of fear more closely than ancient conceptions. More research into how closely this definition matches the Epicurean experience would strengthen my argument, but for the moment I offer an explicit definition so the reader may judge my argument in so far as they agree or disagree with it. Thanks to Dr. Daniel Moore at the University of Tennessee for this comment.

5 See Principle Doctrines 26 and 30; Vatican Sentence 21 for guidelines on dealing with unnecessary desires.

6 Naomi Rinehold's paper for the course on Epicureanism at University of Tennessee offers further discussion on this topic.

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