

## **Epicurus – Ethics**

Feelings are to Ethics what Sensation is to Physics.

Feelings of pleasure and pain are the basic considerations and guides in ethics and they should be the main guides in ethics.

Epicurus develops both psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism.

Psychological hedonism is a theory about what actually does motivate us and influence our choices (pleasure and pain). We actually do make decisions according to what we think will bring greater personal advantage or avoid disadvantages. Most people have a poor understanding of the issues of how to minimize pain and maximize pleasure.

Ethical hedonism is the theory that considerations of pleasure and pain ought to be the main considerations in making decisions about how to act and live. When we use the guides of pleasure and pain in making decisions and in planning the course of our lives, we act naturally and reasonably.

Epicurus maintained that psychological hedonism is not only empirically accurate but that it *logically supports* ethical hedonism. Happiness can only be conceived in terms of pleasure and (the absence of pain). Even the knowledge of physics is good only because of the sense of security and lessening of fear that it makes possible. For example, a knowledge of what is physically possible rules out the existence of demons, witches, curses and spells. Hence, there is no need to fear such things. Understanding that they are either nothing at all or misunderstood natural phenomena enables us to deal with them calmly.

Possessions and luxuries are worth little to the wise, except as a means of improving personal security by bestowing such things as gifts. Wise people would rather give than receive because they don't want things that are unnecessary for them to be content.

Epicurus rejected sensualism (a life of always seeking as much pleasure as possible in the present). He classifies pleasures as either:

- 1) Natural and necessary (food and drink)
- 2) Natural but unnecessary (special foods, drinks)
- 3) Unnatural and unnecessary (fame, status, great wealth, beauty)

Active pleasures - those pursued from a perceived need (e.g, thirst or hunger) and without a perception of their natural limits. One runs a risk of discomfort or pain when pleasures are pursued beyond their natural limits

Static pleasures – pleasures associated with mental equilibrium, free of agitation and capable of being prolonged indefinitely, e. g, conversation with friends, viewing beautiful scenes).

No pleasure is intrinsically bad but they can have bad consequences. No pains are intrinsically good but they can have good consequences. This makes them instrumentally valuable.

No all pleasures are equally good. Not all pains are to be avoided. We should be guided by the standard of the pleasantest possible life overall.

This means generally subordinating active pleasures to static ones because static pleasures are more stable than active ones and because active ones are generally less available, riskier, more expensive or less enduring.

Pleasantest life – stable conditions of freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the mind (*ataraxia*).

The pleasantest life requires eradicating desires that are impossible or too risky to satisfy.

Practical wisdom (prudence) = sound judgment regarding distinctions between natural or necessary pleasures.

Epicurus argues that, far from being irrelevant for a hedonist, virtue, especially prudence, is highly valuable. All the other virtues spring from it. The pleasantest life is inseparable from a virtuous life.

The probability of vice being conducive to the pleasantest life can never be greater than the probability of its not being conducive to the pleasantest life. So, lawbreaking is generally unadvisable.

Epicurus even tries to argue that it is better for someone who acts reasonably to suffer bad fortune than to enjoy good fortune from acting unreasonably.

Whether we act reasonably or unreasonably is within our control and so makes us deserving of either praise or blame.

Question for Epicurus: Why doesn't an unreasonable person who prospers live more pleasantly? Why must the pleasure attained by reasonable persons always exceed that attained by unreasonable persons?

He says that we should be unmoved by receiving good things by luck and that we should not be concerned about bad things happening to us due to misfortune.

According to Epicurus, Hedonism is consistent with maintaining an undisturbed mind in order to promote the interests of others. It is prudent to value friendship and to identify our friends' interests with our own and even take risks on behalf of friends.

It is best to live unknown, economically, with friends, avoiding involvement with politics or competition with others. If possible, avoiding marriage.