ELS 112 Section 07

Epicurean and Stoic Views of Happiness: a critical comparison
(Draft)

(2,700 words)

Submitted by: Robin Turner
Submitted to: His students
16/04/02

1 Introduction

Epicureanism and Stoicism, the two dominant philosophies of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, have undergone a revival in popularity, not only amongst academic philosophers, but also amongst lay people and psychologists. This may well because both are practical philosophies, whose aim is not simply to establish what is true, but to live wisely and happily.

What it means to live happily, though, is not always clear. As many writers (Adler, 2000) have pointed out, the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, while it is frequently translated as "happiness" does not correspond exactly to the modern notion: we tend to think of happiness as a feeling, whereas for most Greeks it was more of a state of well-being or good fortune. Nevertheless, we should not assume that Aristotle's view was universally held, and when Hellenistic philosophers talk about happiness, we may assume that they include the component of "feeling happy", since if happiness or *eudaimonia* is ultimately desirable (the *Summum Bonum*) then good feelings must be at least part of it.

When we look at Stoic writings, the problem of definitions becomes more severe. Although the Stoic sage is often described as *eudaimon* (happy), the goal in terms of a state of mind was *apatheia*. This has been translated as "apathy", but "tranquility" is probably a better translation, since *apatheia* is the absence of all types of *pathos*, or mental disturbance. The situation is further complicated by the fact that some Stoic writers admit the possibility of *eupatheia*, or "good emotions", such as affection and cheerfulness. The Stoic view of happiness, then, appears to be a long-term state of mind, which is free from disturbing passions but which may take pleasure in certain benign emotions.

In Epicureanism, the problem of defining happiness seems at first to be simpler. Happiness, for Epicurus, is the result of pleasure: "we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a happy life" (*Menoecus*, 6[1]). However, Epicurus' idea of pleasure may not be exactly the same as what we normally understand by the word. Pleasure, in Epicurean terms, is "the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul" (*Menoecus*, 7). This surprisingly negative definition of what we normally perceive

[1]References to the *Letter to Menoecus* are by paragraphs in Robert Drew Hick's translation (Epicurus, 2000a).

as a positive quality provides a good point for comparing Epicurean and Stoic views of happiness.

2 Trouble in the soul

Epicurean philosophy holds that "trouble in the soul" is caused by two factors: superstitious beliefs and unnatural desires. In the former category, the most prominent is the fear of death. We might object here that since Epicureans (like almost all Hellenistic philosophers) believe in following Nature, it is natural to fear death. However, it can be argued that what Epicurus advises us to avoid is not the momentary animal fear that occurs when we are in a potentially lethal situation; it is a more abstract fear brought about by the *idea* of death. The argument is that we only properly fear unpleasant states, and this implies awareness; since there can be no awareness after we die, there is nothing to be afraid of:

> Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality.
>
> (*Menoecus*, 3)

Fear of the gods or fate are also brought about by irrational beliefs. Epicurus rejects the popular view of the time, which held that gods were temperamental creatures liable to punish mortals for a variety of reasons, and advocates a scientific approach to natural phenomena: "If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena ... we should have had no need to study natural science" (*Principal Doctrines*, 11).

The other cause of mental unease is unnecessary or excessive desire. Epicureans divide desires into natural and unnatural desires, the latter being avoided wherever possible:

> We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live.
>
> (*Menoecus*, 5)

An interesting point here is that as well as specific conditions for happiness (fulfillment of the "necessary desires"), there is an overall precondition, which is that one should be able to discriminate between types of desire, otherwise pursuit of unnecessary and unnatural desires will not simply expose us to the risk of "pain in the body" but also in itself cause "trouble in the soul", since it is impossible to fulfill unnatural desires entirely (whereas natural desires are usually satisfied easily). At this point Epicureanism starts to approach the Stoic way of thinking, perhaps.

Stoic philosophers also classify desires, but while they would probably go along with the natural/unnatural division, their idea of what is natural is somewhat different. Epicurean "natural desires" seem to be largely concerned with basic physical and social needs: food, friends, and so on. While almost all Greeks identified the natural with the rational (Annas, 1995:243), Stoics placed much more emphasis on universal reason; thus, while an Epicurean natural desire is rational in the sense that it is a sensible thing for an individual to desire, Stoic natural desires are those which are best for the world, not just for the individual. Following rational desires will *normally* result in choosing what is pleasant and beneficial, but there are circumstances where a Stoic would behave in a very "unepicurean" way. A good example is provided by Marcus Aurelius, who fulfilled his duties as emperor admirably while having no *personal* wish to do so.

The Stoics' view of rational choice is related to their view of the universe: "a self-sufficient and self-sustaining living organism, forming a coherent logically ordered system, one that is reflected in the rational unity of the human mind" (Rorty, 1998:245). The rational choice for an individual is thus the choice which the universe (or God) would itself make. Since we are parts (*mere*) of this whole (*ousia*), most of the time this will involve choices which further our well-being; it is rational for the whole to preserve its parts, just as it is rational for me to brush my teeth.

However, there may be circumstances where the part must suffer or be destroyed for the benefit of the whole (as when I have a rotten tooth pulled out). The rational person will therefore not be unduly distressed by natural misfortune, since, as Epictetus put it (quoting Chrysippus) "for my foot too, if it had intelligence, would have an impulse to get muddy" (*Discourses*, 2,6,9).

This makes the Stoic view of "indifferent things" (*adiaphora*) rather more intelligible. External goods, such as health, wealth or friendship, are *lepton*, "to be taken", and it is natural to be pleased when they occur, but we should not be distressed when we are unable to attain them, since we can be sure that this also happens for a good reason. The important thing is the act of choosing, not the result of the choice, since the latter is influenced by events outside our control. This apparent paradox is explained in terms of "objective" and "end". The usual example given is archery practice: the objective is to hit the target but the end is to become a good archer; similarly the objective in life is to attain the indifferent goods, but the end is happiness (Irwin, 1998:228–229).

It may be objected here that Stoics are making life into a game, and that a more apt analogy would be archery in war, where your aim is not to be a good archer but to shoot the enemy. A possible Stoic answer would be that life is more like a game, or a play, than we imagine (a role-playing game, if you like). If we are really simply parts of an intelligent universe, then what is *really* us is not our roles as emperors, slaves or even people, but the intelligence or awareness which permeates the whole universe. If this is the case, and maybe even it is not, we often perform better when we are not concentrating on immediate results.

To sum up, both Epicureans and Stoics realise the role of irrational thinking in causing unhappiness; the main difference is that Epicureans focus on specific beliefs, such as fear of death or the supernatural, whereas Stoics attempt to formulate general rules for eliminating the irrational.

3 Pain in the body

Since Epicureans define pleasure (in part) as the absence of pain, it is not surprising that avoiding pain is a prime concern. Consequently, even some pleasures are to be avoided if they bring pain, while some pain is to be accepted if it results in

greater pleasure; i.e., the elimination of more pain in the long run (*Menoecus*, 5; *Principal Doctrines*, 8)[2]. A further consideration (which appears to contradict the previous assertion) is that although pain is obviously to be avoided, it is not unbearable, since, according to Epicurus, intense pain is short-lived, while chronic pain is generally mild (*Principal Doctrines*, 4). While this may have been a valid observation when Epicurus was writing, since any illness capable of producing extreme pain was likely to kill the patient pretty quickly, it is hardly true now; thanks to modern medicine, people can suffer intense *and* chronic pain without dying. Epicurus also seems to ignore the possibility of torture (which certainly was common in his day). To be fair, Epicureans were concerned with practical measures to help people to be happy under normal circumstances; they did not claim to have a method which would provide happiness under all conditions.

The Stoics, however, had more ambitious plans; they wanted to prove that a wise person could be happy no matter what pain he or she was subjected to. The reasons for classifying pain as ultimately unimportant are twofold. The first is that it is not under our control, or in other words, *adiaphora*. Indifferent things cannot be a source of real happiness, and so cannot inflict real unhappiness upon us. The second reason is that people "are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things" (*Enchirideon*, 5); thus, from a Stoic point of view, it is not the pain that upsets you, but the idea that the pain is bad.

If this seems ludicrous, we may consider the great variety of responses to pain. It has often been observed during wars that civilians who are wounded seem to feel more pain than soldiers, who, although aware of the pain, are often quite cheerful. The difference can probably be explained by what the injury means to the person concerned. For the civilian, it is a disaster; for the soldier it is an expected misfortune, and may sometimes bring beneficial side-effects, such as a medal and a ticket home. At the other extreme, people often react strongly to very minor pain if they are also emotionally disturbed by it, or by previous events (if you've had a bad day, just cutting your finger can be enough to make you cry).

One point the Stoics seem to ignore, though, is that some physical conditions can reduce our ability to apply our reason. It is hard to think completely clearly

[2]It could be argued that since real pleasure is the absence of pain, the kind of pleasures Epicurus urges us to avoid (e.g. sex) are not in fact real pleasures at all.

when we have something as minor as a bad cold, let alone if we have cancer or are being tortured. Nevertheless, if we ignore the characteristic absolutism of Stoic doctrine, we can observe that Stoic attitudes certainly enable some people to withstand considerable pain. We can see this even amongst people with no training in philosophy, such as mothers who cheerfully undergo the pains of childbirth because they see them as natural, inevitable and ultimately beneficial—a typically Stoic attitude.

Another objection to the Stoic position on pain is that while pain is natural, it is also natural to be disturbed by it, since otherwise we would not avoid it. A possible answer to this is that pain is *alepton* and should therefore be avoided by any rational being. Furthermore, most Stoics would have no objection to a temporary reaction to pain, since this is largely a physical thing, and the body is not in our control. The objection is not to yelling when you stub your toe, but to feeling miserable about the fact that you have experienced this pain—what psychologists call "symptom stress" or "secondary symptoms" (Dryden & Yankura, 1992:8). The popular view of a Stoic is of someone who can withstand pain without flinching, but in fact flinching is a physical response. While it can be brought under control, we should remember that Stoicism is not Hatha Yoga; the aim is not to control the body but to realise that ultimately it is outside our control.

4 Conclusion

It now seems clear that despite their obvious and well-known differences, Stoicism and Epicureanism have more in common than we might have expected. Like most philosophies of their age, they assume a correlation, if not identity, between Nature, Reason and the Good. Related to this, emphasis is placed on the elimination of irrational opinions and the mental disturbances (*patheia*) which arise from them, although Epicureanism has the modest aim of eliminating only those particular superstitions which directly cause misery, while Stoics seem to see all irrationality as an obstacle to happiness, and thus set themselves the rather impractical task of eliminating all irrational opinions.

Another similarity is that both Epicureanism and Stoicism define happiness in negative terms; i.e., happiness is the absence of mental (and for Epicureans, phys-

ical) disturbances. This seems to be based on the premise that happiness is our natural condition; if we eliminate suffering, we will naturally be happy. Unless we accept the rather circular definition of suffering as anything which hinders happiness, this view seems incomplete. Happiness may well be a positive condition which implies more than the mere absence of suffering[3].

Turning to the differences between the two philosophies, the most obvious is their attitude to physical pain, which has just been dealt with. Another significant difference concerns their attitude to control. Stoicism posits an absolute dichotomy between that which is in our control and that which is not, while Epicurus holds that "some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency" (*Menoecus*, 7). It can be argued that the Epicurean view is more realistic, and that the severe dualism of the Stoics is a principal cause of some of the other problems in their philosophy. While it is true that our reactions to events are in general more capable of being brought under control than the events themselves, this is by no means always the case; often external circumstances are easier to change than internal states. This radical separation of internal and external also ignores the fact that the brain is a part of the body. A person suffering from mild depression may well benefit from the advice of Marcus Aurelius (who seems to have been mildly depressive himself), but if they are so depressed that they can't think straight, there is probably something seriously wrong with their brain chemistry, and they would at first be better off with a course of anti-depressant drugs rather than a course in philosophy.

Whatever their theoretical shortcomings, though, both Epicureanism and Stoicism have great value as practical philosophies, which is to say that both of them contain sound advice that, if followed, will in general tend to increase happiness, or at least help us to avoid making ourselves unhappy.

References

Adler, Mortimer (2001). Aristotle's *Ethics:* the theory of happiness. *The Radical Academy.* <http://radicalacademy.com/adleraristotleethics1.htm>

[3]This is actually implied by the idea of *eupatheia.*

(2002 January 10).

Annas, J. (1995) Prudence and Morality in Ancient and Modern Ethics. *Ethics* 105. 241-257.

Epicurus (2000a). [trans. Robert Drew Hicks] Letter to Menoecus. *The Internet Classics Archive.* <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html> (2002 January 10).

Epicurus (2000b). [trans. Robert Drew Hicks] Principal Doctrines. *The Internet Classics Archive.* <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/princdoc.html> (2002 March 7).

Epictetus (2000). [trans. Elizabeth Carter] Enchirideon. *The Internet Classics Archive.* <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html> (2002 January 10).

Irwin, T.H. (1998) "Stoic Inhumanity". In Juha Silvola & Troels Engberg-Pedersen (eds.) *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy.* Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Rorty, A.O. (1998) "The Two Faces of Stoicism: Rousseau and Freud". In Juha Silvola & Troels Engberg-Pedersen (eds.) *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy.* Dordrecht: Kluwer.