Epicureanism

The Hobo Test

Brian Dougall has a compelling way of testing philosophical theories

Like a pack of cigarettes, a library’s philosophy section should have a warning label: ‘Something you learn here may ruin your life’. Only here can a flip through a book persuade someone to accept an idea without considering its full meaning and repercussions. The bad side of philosophy that hardly anyone writes about is that some philosophies cause people to become hobos. When I use the term ‘hobo’, I’m not referring to just any homeless person – that is, I’m not referring to a handicapped person, an alcoholic, or someone beset by failure or misfortune. Rather, by the term ‘hobo,’ I’m specifically referring to a person who has lived by his philosophical convictions and is miserable as a result. No one wants his philosophy to lead him under a dark bridge somewhere, draped in a used sleeping bag; his only defense: a rusty pocket knife. Rather, he wants the good life. But what is the good life; and how, you may ask, does all this tie into Epicureanism?

Around 300 BC in Greece’s moderate Mediterranean climate, Epicurus’s way of life seemed pleasant, but in an average city nowadays, his way of life would be miserable. To understand this conclusion, we must first introduce the question of ‘the good life’. Then we can discuss Epicurus’s idea of the good life, and how he tried to live it. Lastly, we can put Epicureanism to a modern day acceptability test. In lieu of the introduction, we’ll call this test The Hobo Test. When we find ourselves enamored with a philosopher’s argument, we have to stop and ask ourselves, Is this philosophy going to make me a hobo? To answer this question we have to make ourselves available as test subjects; use our imagination; account for our current environment and culture; and then ask ourselves, what would life be like if I were to accept this philosophy? From here, we can project a hypothetical future. If in this future we end up as hobos, then we can conclude that the philosophy is impractical.

The Good Life

Philosophers are always chasing the good life, but what exactly is ‘the good life’? Some people think that a famous life is good, whereas others think that a powerful life is good. Authors portray ‘the good life’ in many different ways. Kerouac’s ‘good life’ was constantly being on the move, whereas Salinger’s ‘good life’ was an authentic self, apart from ‘phonies’. But since this is a philosophy article, let’s consider what philosophers think.

When philosophers talk about ‘the good life’, they create a universal ideal by placing the before good life, much like people discuss ‘the perfect woman’ or ‘the best conversation’. They argue that one method will allow us to acquire this universal ideal, like a key to a lock. It should work for any person, at any time or place. If a philosopher truly discovers the good life, then reasonably, his own life should be good as a result. Epicurus believed he had found this universal method for the good life. Yet, what exactly is ‘good’?

Epicurus & His Philosophy

Epicurus and rival philosophers, the Stoics, would quickly assert their definitions for ‘good’ if they were following along. The Stoics would say that ‘good’ simply means ‘benefit’. For example, we should help someone only if we will benefit from helping them. Epicurus would concede that ‘good’ has a beneficial nature. However, he would insist that ‘benefit’ is not the prime meaning of ‘good’ – the question will inevitably arise: what is benefit? Epicurus would explain that benefit is measured in pleasure. To Epicurus, therefore, good and evil are synonymous with pleasure and pain.

In today’s culture, as I write ‘pleasure’, many readers will immediately think ‘sex’. To Epicurus, however, ‘pleasure’ had a much broader definition. ‘Pleasure’ could mean anything from a sip of water on hot day, to hearing our name called aloud in a group. Likewise, ‘pain’ meant anything from a prick on the finger to receiving a scowl from someone at a party. To Epicurus, satisfaction is the highest pleasure, whereas unfulfilled desire is the highest pain. But even though they are opposites, their definitions are intertwined: desire is the absence of satisfaction, and satisfaction is the absence of desire. Importantly, “No pleasure is a bad thing in itself,” Epicurus said, “but the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasure.” Epicurus is hinting at things such as sex, drugs, power, and money. He maintained that the desire for these sorts of things is the most rampant and overlooked form of pain. For example, if we desire a car that we can never afford, then we will be pained greatly at the thought.

After defining good and evil, Epicurus defined the good life. To Epicurus, the good life consists of experiencing as much pleasure with as little pain as humanly possible. Therefore, to achieve the good life, we must strive for easily accessible pleasures in rational amounts. By keeping our desires humble, we can satisfy them over and over again. The pain they cause us will be smaller than the pleasure we derive from their satisfaction. In this way, anyone can maintain a sustainably high pleasure-to-pain ratio. Back in Epicurus’s day, examples of easily-accessible pleasures were water, fruit, a comfortable hammock, a simple hut, and some friends. Examples of difficult-to-attain pleasures were foreign wines, stinky cheeses, large feather beds, columned mansions, and political allies.

Epicurus argued that ‘difficult to acquire’ means ‘more pain than pleasure’. Therefore, any desire for things that were difficult to acquire was absurd. The recent Green Movement uses a parallel way of thinking, by trying to make life better by implementing energy sources that are sustainable, renewable, and easy to acquire. This means phasing out limited energy sources that are not reproducible and difficult to acquire. Green families use solar and biodiesel instead of oil and gasoline – a practice that is also highly beneficial to nature.

Nature

Epicurus thanked nature because his philosophy would not have been possible without it. “I am grateful to blessed Nature because she made what is necessary easy to acquire, and what is hard to acquire, unnecessary,” he said. He proclaimed generally, “The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For if someone has these things and is confident of having them in the future, he might contend even with Zeus for happiness.” Epicurus is said to have napped in his hammock, eating a simple diet of bread, cheese, olives, and drinking an occasional cup of wine. For himself, he claimed, “[I am] ready to rival Zeus for happiness so long as [I have] a barley cake and some water.”

Yet Epicurus seemed to rely on more than just a barley cake and some water for his happiness. Without a job to support him, Epicurus relied on Greece’s mild climate and bountiful land. He also relied on a relatively small population to compete with for natural resources. In addition, he relied on natural resources that were clean, and open spaces that were free enough to live on peacefully. He relied on a political system that enforced peace, order, and justice without also encroaching on his way of life.

If Epicurus were alive today, I doubt that he would be so bold in his remarks to Zeus. Nature has changed radically since Epicurus spoke about it in 300 BC. It is not the case anymore that “the necessary can be satisfied with next to nothing; for nature’s riches are easily acquired.”

The largest underlying change in nature since ancient times concerns population. More people means more competition for resources. We see this in wildlife all the time. For instance, when small lakes dry up during a long summer, the fish population in those lakes will scramble harder and harder for space and food. Just forty years ago, if someone were to have told Epicurus that the world’s population had reached 3.7 billion, he would have been shocked. Now, if someone told Epicurus that the population has almost doubled to over 7 billion only 40 years later, he would have fallen out of his hammock.

The second largest change in nature since ancient times is that humanity firmly controls nature with laws and law enforcement. Loitering laws, cruising laws, tasers, and red light cameras were unheard of in Epicurean times. In contrast to Epicurus’s society, our society has libraries filled with laws that are strictly enforced by well-paid, technologically-advanced policemen, and even further backed by an army of judges, lawyers, and career politicians. In 2009, under San Francisco’s ‘no sit/lie’ law, cops punished people 2,600 times for sleeping on the sidewalk. Since paying fines is a problem for anyone living this way, mounting tickets could lead to jail time. Today, more than one in fifty people (2.3%) are under state correctional supervision in the US.

The third largest change in nature since ancient times is systematic and massive land ownership. Governments, individuals and corporations alike, own nature – e.g., national parks, private beaches, and cattle ranches. You can’t depend on nature if it’s not yours. Epicurean hammocks and forest huts are upwards of $5 per night in California State Parks.

The fourth largest change in nature since ancient times is pollution. For example, I assume Epicurus drank out of a clean nearby stream. Nowadays, factory run-off, acid rain and sewage ensure that no one sane would drink straight out of a nearby stream. Hopefully, a modern day Epicurean lives close to a park water fountain.

In combination, these four large changes in nature make modern Epicureanism miserable and nearly impossible. Comedian Doug Stanhope summarizes this point well in a joke about the old saying, ‘Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime.’ Today, if you “teach a man to fish,” then he’s “gotta get a fishing permit.” But, he won’t have any money, so he’ll have to “get a job; enter the social security system; and pay taxes.” If he builds a fire to cook the fish, he’ll be cited for an open flame. After eating the fish, his chances of mercury poisoning double, and the department of health will scold him about where he dumped the guts and scales, saying, ‘This is not a sanitary environment!’ At the end of the day, if you get sick of it all, ‘ladies and gentlemen, it’s not even legal for you to kill yourself in this country” (Doug Stanhope, Deadbeat Hero, 2004).

Self-Sufficiency & Friendship

“Self-sufficiency is the greatest wealth of all, and the greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom.” – Epicurus

Even in ancient times, nature was not always bountiful. Famine or drought would force scavengers to beg out of necessity. Although no evidence portrays Epicurus as a beggar, a man who does not work for a living may have to rely on other people’s generosity at times. However, begging is contrary to self-sufficiency, an important Epicurean tenant. Also, since many people find begging for food reprehensible, the beggar becomes a target of social stigma. In this regard, if Epicurus begged, he violated his principles, depended on society, and experienced shame – all painfully miserable consequences.

Yet Epicurus was known for having many friends. How could this be? No one wants to be friends with a selfish pleasure-hoarder. They lead lonely lives. Quite the contrary, Epicurus would contend: friends are necessary to secure our own pleasures. Friends help and protect one another; care for one another; and enliven one another’s free time. Friends are an insurance policy to pleasure-hoarders. When we pay a monthly fee for car insurance, it covers the cost of an expensive accident. Now, we don’t have to worry about scratching someone’s BMW. In the same way, when we help friends in need, if we are ever in need ourselves, they will help us. Now, the possibility of an empty stomach is no longer a problem.

Epicurus’s argument for friendship assumes we may depend on friends in the future, which is not a self-sufficiency forecast. Epicurus never bridged the gap between friendship and self-sufficiency. Therefore, the most confusing part of Epicurus’ philosophy is that he values a contradiction. To his defense, “in just one household,” Epicurus assembled “large congregations of friends...bound together by a shared feeling of the deepest love” (Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, Hellenistic Philosophy Introductory Readings, 1997, p.62).

Pleasure’s Problem & Pain’s Reward

Contrary to Epicurean thought, many things that are easy to acquire produce misery. Rent for a substandard apartment is easy to acquire, but living in a roach-infested slum is miserable. Mediocre goals are easily attained, but realizing afterward that we could have achieved much more is miserable. This is why De Vinci didn’t set his heart on finishing a coloring book. Instead, he painted the Mona Lisa.

“He who has learned the limits of life knows that it is easy to provide that which removes the feeling of pain owing to want and make one’s whole life perfect. So there is no need for things which involve struggle” – Epicurus

Contrary to this Epicurean thought, many things that are difficult to acquire are highly pleasurable. Large goals we give ourselves, as long as they are reasonable, are difficult to attain, but highly pleasurable when we attain them. Moreover, recalling the memory of their achievement becomes a long-lasting source of pleasure. For example, a writer wants to publish a novel – a difficult goal to attain. However, if he publishes his novel, he will be immensely pleased, and his achievement may bring him pleasure for a long time.

What about philosophy’s taboo: materialistic things? Is it so improbable that a businessman who works tirelessly to keep up payments for a large house and swimming pool actually finds the pleasure of using these things worth the pain he endures to do so? In other words, maybe the pleasure he gains from swimming in his pool with his friends in his big mansion far exceeds the pain of his working tirelessly to make this possible.

Epicureanism: The Hobo Test

Let’s stop now and ask ourselves, ‘Will I become a hobo if I accept Epicureanism?’ In respect of my earlier recommendation, let’s complete a hypothetical future projection and find out. I will use myself as the guinea pig.

Any transition to living out a philosophy starts out slow, so I’ll begin by attempting to live humbly. A small apartment with cheap rent, along with a diet of rice and beans, seems humble enough to start. To finance this, I’ll get a simple, low-paying job. Since cheap apartments only exist in ghettos, which are usually far from job markets, I’ll probably need to commute. A car is too expensive and extravagant for my new income and philosophy, so the city bus will have to be my mode of transport. Working to pay for rent, transportation, and food will fill my days for a while – that is, until I realize that jobs, apartments, buses, and groceries depend on an established market society, which in turn, means I depend on a market society. However, being a newly-sworn-in Epicurean, I need to be self-sufficient: I need to depend on nature or nothing at all! So I quit my job, stop taking the bus, leave my cheap apartment, and stop buying food at the grocery store. Now I have achieved living humbly and depend solely on myself. So my new goal is to gather a group of Epicurean friends.

I ask my current friends to become Epicurean – but they all decline, pointing out my current homelessness. They’re still unconvinced that Epicureanism leads to the good life. While working my low-paying job, I lost many friends because I would always go over to their place and use their stuff. Moreover, they liked activities that require money: for example, drinking at bars and going to the movies. Even playing basketball requires money: the ball and pump cost money, and if the court is not walking distance, even travel becomes an expense.

I had a girlfriend while working my low-paying job, but she broke up with me. She preferred to sleep in safe neighborhoods, and she also liked regular sex. The latter became apparent when I tried to limit sex in an attempt to humble my physical pleasures; she cheated on me with a rich entrepreneur. I’m 100% sure she would have hated sleeping on the street, so maybe breaking up was inevitable.

Now that I’ve mentioned it, living on the street has become miserable, but I can’t let it detour me from my philosophical course. To make Epicureanism work, I must make Epicurean friends, and just like Epicurus, attempt to set up a comfortable Epicurean commune in the woods.

The public library is a perfect place to convert people to Epicureanism, so I begin soliciting there. As luck turns out, I attract a few people to live in the woods with me. We pack up what we can carry, and head out. On the first night, everyone gets cold and hungry; and in the morning, a park ranger scatters everyone and breaks down our makeshift huts.

As of now, I have not made any friends, nor have I set up a commune.

Almost a year has passed now since I quit my job and left my apartment. I’m poor, smelly, and ragged. As of now, my appearance has made it impossible to attract friends. Well, not entirely impossible, but the people I do attract seem neither friendly nor sane. Even in a fancy Park Avenue apartment, I couldn’t find pleasure in their company.

Last week, I drank out of a nearby river in an attempt to be more Epicurean, but contracted giardiasis. Fortunately I collapsed in the middle of the street, and someone called an ambulance. I was rushed to a hospital for treatment. Upon my release, the hospital didn’t give me a medical bill because I couldn’t pay it. I guess the taxpayers will pay for the antibiotics in my pocket. Oh well, society made the stream undrinkable, so it’s their fault anyway.

While drinking from a park water fountain, I think about my next move. I think of begging for money so that I can buy a plot of wilderness in Northern California, just like the Bear Commune hippies of the 1960s. That will solve the ranger problem! Also, I’ll start my commune in the summer when the weather is mild. Both Roman Epicureanism and the Bear Commune turned into big orgies, but mine will not.

Sticking to my plan, I beg for money. My sign says, ‘Need Your Money For Commune’. Only drunk college kids give me cash because they think it’s funny. Other people yell, ‘Get a job, hippy!’ When I do get money, I feel dependent and undignified. Sometimes, I use a little of it to buy food from McDonalds. The police have been issuing me a ticket almost every week for sleeping next to the public library. After issuing a warrant, the police arrest me for unpaid fines, so I spend the night in a cell. Surprisingly, it’s more pleasant than where I usually spend the night. The next morning, a policeman tells me that my offenses are ‘on record’ and a higher fine will be issued every month that I do not pay my current fines. Moreover, they will take from my wages if I ever get a job. After leaving the police station, I laugh a little because with that news. Even if I renounced Epicureanism, what would be the point of getting a job?

Later that week, I’m walking in a wooded area off the side of a highway, and find an old sleeping bag. As luck turns out, I also find a rusted Swiss Army knife in the corner of a rain gutter. Night has fallen earlier than expected, and rain seems imminent. So, I find the nearest shelter, which happens to be a bridge underpass. I convert a dark corner into my bed for the night, but as I drape myself with the tattered sleeping bag, a loud noise shatters the silence. I switch open my pocket knife, and reach out to defend myself...

HOBO TEST

Unofficial Results

PHILOSOPHY: Epicureanism

HYPOTHETICAL PROJECTION: 100% Complete

HOBO FUTURE: Yes

Conclusion

As you have just read, Epicureanism has failed the hobo test.

You may think my hypothetical projection was too extreme, and maybe it was. However, once when walking a street in Berkeley, CA, a friend of mine asked a raggedy beggar how he became what he is today. The beggar said, “I was tired of needless responsibilities.” In ancient times, Epicurus was also quoted as saying, “Necessity is a bad thing, but there is no necessity to live with necessity.”

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