

Study Notes: Epicurus

His theory is called “hedonism” (from the Greek “hedon,” meaning pleasure). It states that to attain eudaimonia (i.e., to live well) is to live a life of maximum pleasure.

Epicurus is also a materialist.

Materialism: Everything that exists is made up of matter.

Dualism: Everything that exists is made up either of matter of some other, non-material substance.

Substance: Anything capable of existing independently.

Intrinsic value: Value something has because of what it is in itself. E.g., pleasure. It is widely held that only mental states can be intrinsically valuable.

Extrinsic value: Value something has because of what it leads to or can be used for. E.g., money.

Epicurus’s ethical theory is a form of consequentialism: It morally evaluates actions by examining their consequences. No action is morally permissible or impermissible in itself. Its moral status depends upon its results. One implication of this view is that an action that is permissible in one set of circumstances may be impermissible in other circumstances (because circumstances influence outcomes).

Mental Pleasures: Pleasures that do not arise from the operation of the 5 senses.

Physical Pleasures: Pleasures that arise from the operation of the 5 senses. Also known as sensory pleasures.

Kinetic Pleasures: Pleasures that arise from an activity (either mental or physical).

Catastematic Pleasures: Pleasures that arise from a state of being. Also known as static pleasures.

Examples of Pleasure

	Kinetic	Catastematic
Physical	Eating, sports, sex	Feeling full after a meal, lying in the sun
Mental	Reading a book, playing chess, daydreaming	Feeling loved, feeling safe, feelings of self-worth

Physical pleasures are risky. Kinetic pleasures last only as long as the events that generate them. The most valuable pleasures, therefore, are mental, catastematic ones. To attain eudaimonia, one should maximize one’s mental, catastematic pleasures.

Epicurus’s Practical Recommendations:

- Avoid work
- Avoid education
- Live a simple life
- Cultivate friendships

Avoiding Sources of Mental Pain: Mental pains are sources of anxiety that interfere with

1. Fear of the Gods

People fear the gods:

- The gods may punish us or fail to bless us
- Punishments and blessings are a concern for this life and for the afterlife

Epicurus says these fears are irrational:

- Although the gods do exist, they will neither punish nor bless us. They are ignoring us. They are very intelligent and live lives of perfect bliss. They are focused on maintaining their mental, catastematic pleasures. To pay any attention to human beings would interfere with this.
- We need not worry about the afterlife because there isn't one. Remember that Epicurus is a materialist: You do not have a non-material soul that could survive the death of your body.

2. Fear of Death:

People fear death:

- It may be painful
- The afterlife may be very unpleasant
- Death means leaving many life-projects unfinished

Epicurus says that these fears are irrational:

- As long as we are alive, death is absent for us. It is irrational to fear that which is absent.
- We can deal with pain by focusing our minds on pleasant memories.
- There will be no afterlife, so there's no point worrying about it. (Remember, Epicurus is a materialist.)
- In a life focused on maximizing mental, catastematic pleasure, one will not begin any projects that might then be left unfinished.