Epicureanism as a Foundation for Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract: The paper discusses the manner and extent to which Epicurean ethics can serve as a general philosophy of life, capable of supporting philosophical practice in the form of philosophical counseling. Unlike the modern age academic philosophy, the philosophical practice movement portrays the philosopher as a personal or corporate advisor, one who helps people make sense of their experiences and find optimum solutions within the context of their values and general preferences. Philosophical counseling may rest on almost any school of philosophy, ranging — in the Western tradition— from Platonism to the philosophy of language or logic. While any specialist school of philosophy may serve valuable purposes by elucidating specific aspects of one's experiences and directing future action, the more 'generalist' the philosophy used as the basis for counseling is, the broader and more far-reaching its potential impact on the counselee. Epicurean ethics is a prime example of a philosophy of life that is suitable for philosophical counseling today. Its closer examination reveals that, contrary to superficial opinion, it is not opposed to Stoicism and may in fact incorporate Stoicism and its antecedent virtues (including many Christian virtues) in a simple yet comprehensive practical system of directions for modern counseling.

Epicurus: Philosophy as therapy and the role of pleasure

The essential 'therapeutic' function of philosophy is perhaps most clearly shown by Epicurean ethics. While in the modern age psychology and psychologists have carved up a legally exclusive niche for themselves as the only 'experts' qualified to provide talk therapy, many counseling experiences, as well as common sense, suggest that psychology, a child of philosophy, merely extrapolates and simplifies a philosophical methodology of therapy, and in many cases falls short of achieving its full effect. Increasingly psychological intervention is geared to treat symptoms and try to effect external behavior change without looking into the causes of the seemingly dysfunctional behavior or trying to elucidate the meanings of the person's problems. Although admittedly there are clearly mental illnesses that require medical intervention, there are many more cases of 'problems of meaning' that cause anxiety, depression, personality and relationship issues. These are today commonly treated by medication, yet many may be properly addressed by philosophy. The legal ban on the use of the term 'therapy' for philosophical counsel marks a de-humanisation of counseling and an arbitrary turf boundary imposed by the zealous keepers of psychology's claim on exclusivity. The now 'heretic' concept of philosophy as therapy, and not as merely complementary to therapy, was in fact essential to the very beginnings of western ethics, which, in Stoicism and Epicureanism (and to some extent in Plato and Aristotle) were what we call today 'philosophy of life':

> Empty is that philosopher's discourse which offers therapy for no human passion. Just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not expel the sickness of bodies, so there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the passions of the soul. (Porphury, *Ad Marcellam*, in Pötscher, 1969, p. 31).

It is the role of ethics as a philosophy of life to 'expel passions of the soul' by providing precepts for a balanced, happy life. Such life must include moderate pleasures and a wisdom that helps virtue to flourish, thus allowing conscience to rest at ease. Perhaps the best formulation of this perception of ethics was Epicurus' 5th Principal Doctrine, which reads:

> It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.

The 5th Principal Doctrine marks a fundamental distinction between Epicurean ethics, on the one hand, and Plato and Aristotle, on the other. Plato argues that pleasure, though desirable, is not an end in itself (cannot be a *telos*) and should be sought in proportion with reason. Such a life pursuit ideally results in a 'mixed life', where reason is accorded a higher position in the hierarchy of values (*The Republic* 581c–588a). According to Plato, there is something inherently heteronomous in pleasure, something that it is not 'contained in itself'. This heteronomy is reflected in the fact that pleasure 'could not be measured by itself, but needed an external yardstick, such as purity'. In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle interprets pleasure as the unimpeded activity (*energeia*) of a natural condition of the soul. While he renounces pure hedonism, Aristotle reconciles his 'rationalism' with a positive role accorded to pleasure by considering that pleasure which arises from intellectual activity the most noble of all pleasures (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1153a14–15). The point of departure for Epicurus in relation to the highly nuanced views of pleasure held by Plato and Aristotle is that for him every pleasure *qua* pleasure is a good in itself, and every pain *qua* pain is an evil. To procure pleasure and prevent pain is thus the ultimate aim of life and the most basic value-matrix on which to base a life-plan.

A life plan can be designed either on rationalist, intuitionist, or hedonistic grounds. Epicurus opts for uniting reason and pleasure by making the sustained pleasure of a well integrated person the deciding criterion for a good life-plan*:*

> We declare pleasure to be the beginning and end of the blessed life, for we have recognized pleasure as the first and natural good, and from this we start in every choice and avoidance, and this we make our goal, using feeling as the canon by which we judge every good (Epicurus. *Letter to Monoeceus*, in Bailey, 1926, p. 128).

The use of pleasure as therapy to achieve greater fulfillment and satisfaction in life, however, brings one deeper into Epicurean philosophical methodology and casts Epicurus' ethics in a light very similar to the Stoic ethics of asceticism. The main goal of Epicurean quest of pleasure is not a maximum intensity of pleasure. Rather Epicureans insist on a pleasure the threshold of which is "the avoidance of all pain", and a life-plan that minimises the influence of chance on one's happiness:

> Fortune, I have made advance preparations against you, and barred the passage against every secret entry you try to make. We shall not give ourselves up as captives to you or to any other circumstance. But when necessity leads us out, we shall spit upon life and upon those who emptily plaster themselves in it, and we shall depart from it with a noble song of triumph, crying out at the end: 'We have had a good life' (Metrodorus of Lampsakus. *Sententinae Vaticanae*, printed in Bailey, 1926, sentence no. 47).

In order to sustain pleasure throughout one's life, it seems that Epicurus suggests at least two stages that must be passed. First, one must dispense with fear, which prevents one from achieving a freedom of the spirit and a relaxed state of the mind (*ataraxia*). To do so, one is well advised to apply the four therapeutic instructions known as the Epicurean Tetrapharmakos, which can be paraphrased in the following way:

1. Do not fear gods, for they do not busy themselves with insignificant human affairs;

2. Do not fear death, because it does not bring with itself any threatening new experience;

3. Always be aware that things necessary for happiness (in the minimalist sense of absence of pain and want (*aponia*) and absence of anxiety (*ataraxia*)) are easy to procure;

4. Always be aware that the inevitable pains tend to be outweighed by pleasures, that they are usually relatively easy to endure, and even in protracted illness filled with pain, moments of pleasure, if properly conceived, greatly outweigh the moments of intense pain.

The last point is elaborated in *Principal Doctrine* no. 4:

Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain.

There is a notable parallel between the Epicurean insistence on the need for 'therapy' to liberate ourselves from fear and the typical situation in modern civilisation that in many urban centres most people are in formal therapy for anxiety, and the prescribing of medication is everyday practice just to keep people 'functional' amidst threats and fears inherent in increasingly complex lives. If one replaces the notion of threat of 'gods' (the prominent sources of internal sanction for prohibited behavior in Antiquity) with conscience, reproach by peers or social stigma (the prominent sources of anxiety today), one gets an almost ready set of recommendations as to how to gear the initial phase of contemporary counseling of almost any counselee.

Epicurus joined the rest of the ancient Greek tradition in distinguishing between natural and necessary desires and those that are not natural or necessary. While most other ancient philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, include the needs of the stomach (the desire for food and drink), as well as the need for shelter and sexual desires, amongst the natural and necessary desires, Epicurus attaches less weight to sexuality and considers the sexual desire to be natural, but not necessary, because it is 'easy to satisfy, but equally easy to refrain from' (Usener, 1887, p. 456). His minimalism is thus structurally (in the types of desires considered absolutely necessary) more pronounced than in the respective treatments of the topic by more 'rationalist' thinkers of the time. According to Epicurus, the only desires that a wise man habitually seeks to satisfy are those that are both natural and necessary. At the same time, the satisfaction of those desires marks the (quite low) threshold of happiness:

The flesh cries out not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. If someone is in these states and expects to remain so, he would rival even Zeus in happiness (Sent. Vat. Sentence 33).

This is where the most controversial point in Epicurean ethics, the concept of "pleasures of the flesh" as the fundamental desires that guide our action, plays a seemingly twofold role. On the one hand, this aspect

of Epicureanism has been focused by the critics and used to declare Epicureanism the opposite to Stoicism, as a philosophical doctrine advocating a profligate life style. On the other hand, once the 'desires of the flesh' are considered more carefully, it becomes clear that they signify a minimalism of desire: only those necessary desires of the flash without which life would not be able to be sustained are ones that should be routinely satisfied, and the person — any person — who is not thirsty or hungry and has shelter, has reason to consider themselves as happy as the supreme Greek god. There is a condition attached to this, however: an ability to develop resilience to more challenging needs, which, unlike the needs of the flesh, are difficult to satisfy and thus may become sources of unhappiness and anxiety. Contrary to what critics have pointed out, the "flesh" in Epicureanism is a beacon of ascetic life style rather than indulgence:

> The wealth demanded by nature both has its bounds and is easy to procure; but that demanded by empty opinions goes off into infinity (Principal Doctrine no 15).[1]

The concept of 'empty opinion' shows a rationalist aspect of Epicurean ethics: the way to living a life free of stress and deprivation is primarily based on changing perceptions of own needs. Once a minimalism of needs, reduced only to desires that are both natural and necessary, (needs of the flesh), is adopted, it becomes clear that any other perspective leads progressively into potentially insatiable appetites that 'go off into infinity'. In other words:

> Insatiable is not the stomach, as the many say, but false opinion about the stomach's boundless need to be filled (Sent. Vat. 39).

The role of 'empty opinion' (prejudice, false beliefs) is what needs to be addressed by the therapeutic and educational role of philosophy, because these opinions, rather than real needs, cause the unhappiness that seemingly arises from an absence of things one needs or desires:

> Wherever intense seriousness is present in those natural desires which do not lead to pain if they are unfulfilled, these come about because of empty opinion; and it is not because of their own nature that they are not relaxed, but because of the empty opinion of the person (Principal Doctrine 30).

It is easy to see how these Epicurean views are directly relevant to problems arising from the modern rampant fabrication of needs and the resulting mass neurosis. The concept of potentially insatiable desires has even entered modern 'left wing criminology' as that of 'relative deprivation'. People are considered more prone to committing crimes if they do not have what their peers have, regardless of how high the property threshold is, or whether or not they actually need what they do not have. For example, for people living in poor areas this may relate to sufficient food, electricity and clothes, which brings the needs-based account of propensity to commit crime close to intuitive justification. However, in wealthy areas, where most people own a swimming pool, those who do not own one, even though they own everything else they need, fall into the category of 'relatively deprived', and apparently crimes have been committed as a pattern, conforming to this motive of 'deprivation' (see Webber 2007).

The above type of empty opinion relates to social prejudice as well as to individual or personal one. Just as the purpose of social reforms is to 'cure' the society from empty opinion about the way it needs to operate, its organisation and the needs it must cater for, the purpose of individual counseling is to identify, with a counselee, a road leading directly to the most optimal satisfaction of her real needs, while dispensing with false opinion about the significance and role of a variety of relationships, commitments and desires that cause instability, confusion and anxiety. This is the cognitive role of counseling that is often neglected, even

intentionally sabotaged, by psychotherapy, which focuses on the idea that 'behavior change' is required, backed up by the conviction that such change cannot be effected through cognition alone, but must include an element of volitional manipulation.

While it may be true that behavior change in itself may not always be possible only based on insight, it is also true that in many cases people have problems of meaning that cause their world to become warped and lose focus, and the resulting dysfunctionality manifests itself as psychological problems. In such, numerous cases, returning 'home' cannot be achieved in reverse order, especially if the intervention is focused on motivational manipulation aimed to effect behavior change only. Behavioral dysfunctionality is often a result of cognitive confusion. The truth about one's life situation needs to be established and clarified with the counselee, and in healthy individuals this alone should lead to behavior change. In any case, behavior change itself may not be the main indicator of success of counseling, but rather the satisfaction with life, the achievement of harmony between inner values and external action — what is commonly called 'quality of life'. This is the meaning of Aristotle's statement that 'the unexamined life is not worth living', and at the same time the main calling of philosophy as a counseling discipline. Conversely, being 'behaviourally functional' does not guarantee being happy, or leading a life that is 'worth living', namely having a high quality of life. This is witnessed by the hundreds of thousands of 'functional' people today who take Prozac every day and perceive their daily routines as prison regimens from which they try to escape through alcohol, drugs, sports, or, in more optimistic cases, through counseling, religion, friendship or writing. The numerous modern therapies for dissatisfaction and identity issues mark the problem: there is a general deficiency in the quality of life, and it is this defficiency that requires counseling. To address this potential void in one's existence from the point of view of meaning and direction has been the calling of philosophy from its beginning. The Epicurean 'naturalist' criterion to determine the right from the wrong, the necessary from the superfluous, and the wisdom that leads to 'happiness' from 'empty opinion' — the concept of pleasure — contrary to common critique, is a highly potent criterion that lends itself easily to a variety of philosophical intervention techniques today.

Epicureanism provides for a direct and verifiable criterion of the appropriate action, namely what we could call 'informed satisfaction'. It requires the possession of virtues so that the pleasure arising from the satisfaction of one's optimum of desires is not burdened, and thus lessened, by the pangs of conscience, fear of the future (such as in potential legal reprisals arising from immoderate and illegitimate gain), and open to the cultivation of the more basic into the more sophisticated preferences. Epicurus himself died in agony, however while on his deathbed he claimed that he had lived a happy life, and that the pains of his illness had been greatly outweighed by the 'pleasures of conversation' he had had with his friends. This points to a common sense approach to counseling that is capable of remaining on relatively uncontroversial value grounds for most people (innocent pleasures stated by Epicureanism as the lower threshold of satisfaction with life), while allowing substantial room for being refined into minutely structured value systems such as ascetic or Christian ones. All of these systems may be seen as being in accord with Epicureanism, depending on what types of pleasures are accentuated and how they are specifically determined for each individual.

The general principle of satisfaction in Epicureanism reads as follows:

He who follows nature and not empty opinions is self-sufficient in all things. For relative to what is sufficient for nature every possession is riches, but relative to unbounded desires even the greatest riches are not riches but poverty (Usener, 1887, p. 202).

Several *Principal Doctrines* provide evidence for a further intellectual dimension of Epicurus' ethics, namely the emphasis on an economy of satisfactions so as to make them sustainable throughout the entire life, thus reducing one's exposure to chance. Such pleasures are appropriately termed "peace" by Epicurus, and come very close to the Stoic and Christian ideas about satisfaction (as in the Christian Liturgy Prayer: 'May peace come upon you.').

Principal Doctrines 8, 16 and 20 read:

8: No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail distur-bances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.

16: Chance seldom interferes with the wise man; his greatest and highest interests have been, are, and will be, directed by reason throughout his whole life.

20: The flesh receives as unlimited the limits of pleasure; and to provide it requires unlimited time. But the mind, intellectually grasping what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of the future, procures a complete and perfect life, and we have no longer any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless the mind does not shun pleasure, and even when circumstances make death imminent, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life.

The three maxims suggest clearly that some pleasures of the moment, however innocent they may seem, should be avoided, even at the cost of temporary pain or serious deprivation, if in a more compre-hensive calculus they are likely to cause more disturbance in the future than they bring satisfaction in the present. This is a classic utilitarian model of maximising satisfaction while minimising the disturbance con-nected with some types of satisfaction. This may require the agent to take a more troublesome road or even to submit oneself to pain where pleasure is available instead, in order that one may lead a more peaceful life in the future, as the pleasure of the moment comes at a significant cost in the future. This allows, as the next two maxims imply, for a most sustained life of pleasure and peace, as opposed to 'bursts' of extreme satisfaction that last a short time and usually lead to withdrawal syndromes of various kinds at the lower, and to bursts of corresponding pain, guilt, or punishment, at the higher ebb. Finally, the last maxim shows that for Epicurus the maximisation of pleasure is a life-plan guided by reason. There are no guarantees in such life that pleasure-seeking strategies will succeed, but regardless of the extent to which they succeed or fail the intellectual pleasure of 'knowing the desires of the flesh' and acting accord-ingly so as to secure them in a most sustainable way throughout one's life, will ensure that one has had a 'good life', or morally justified life, based on the guiding values with all the disclaimers this entails when the requirements of communal virtue and 'justice' are concerned. Only a balanced life, arising from a quest of minimalist desires, amplified by intellectual enjoyment of the development of virtue and being 'just' to one's peers, may be seen as a 'good life', conducted according to a rational life-plan. Indeed, the concept of 'pleasure' in Epicureanism is anything but uncritical indulgence. Only such a balanced and rationally planned life strategy may result in a lasting 'well balanced state of the flesh'. Such a rational life strategy, in its ultimate form, is "ultimately indifferent, like *ataraxia*, to the actual achievement of naturally desirable objectives. (…) the perfection of the strategy is what happiness and the best life depend upon". Thus "(t)he Epicurean theory of desire and the limits of pleasure (…) has a shape very similar to the Stoic theory of appropriate action" (Algra et al, 2005, p. 666).

Epicurean ethics in the modern philosophical counseling

Understood in the broad sense as a 'philosophy of life', ethics plays a key role in philosophical counseling. Candidates for this type of practical philosophical work are rational, well organised persons, with problems that arise either from unresolved conflicts or from cognitive and emotional confusion. Many such counselees have problems that could be summed up as 'issues with their worldview'. Any exceptionally stressful situation may trigger or, if they are chronic, aggravate these problems, ranging from difficulties at work to divorce to death of a close person or a serious illness. In most situations, whether or not the 'symptoms' or 'behavioral disturbance' that often result from such problems are treated medically or not, it is essential for the sufferer to understand her predicament, to clarify her values and attach value-assessments to her previous choices in order to map a way out of the seeming impasse. Philosophical counseling helps people to find the best solutions according to their own measurements, while respecting their freedom of choice on all levels of decision-making. In doing so, philosophical counselors abide by their own ethics, which prohibits explicit suggestions to the counselees about what specifically they are to do in particular situations, what choices to make, or what value-systems to favour over others.

In counseling moral concerns are understood in a broad sense, as including moral obligations to oneself. This way of conceptualising ethical issues allows philosophical counseling to progress in situations when the counselee's own values and initiative are darkened or inhibited, by questioning one's 'constitutional' goals and qualities, moving into the realm of one's duties to oneself or one's rights to enjoy life. Such situations tend to result, in due course, in a discussion of the limits of one's rightful pursuit of one's own preferences, as well as of the best and most sustainable way to achieve one's goals. More often than not, external limitations imposed by the environment make it the counselor's task to help the counselee make sense of the various impossibilities, restrictions or moral boundaries. One of the modern approaches to address such boundaries with counselees is the IDEA method of stoic counsel.

The IDEA method is the acronym for four phases of dealing with the problem, namely:

1. I = Identify the real issue behind the counselee's complaints;

2. D = Distinguish the 'internals' from the 'externals', namely the elements of the situation and potential courses of action that are a matter of the counselee's free choice from those that are 'fixed' and imposed externally, acting as restrictions on the counselee's exercise of free choice;

3. E = Exert effort only where acting can change the situation, and

4. A = Accept what cannot be changed (Ferraiolo, 2010).

The process of progression through the four phases of the Stoic counsel appreciates the need for argumentation and deliberation in order to 'identify', 'distinguish', 'exert effort' and 'accept the unchangeable'. While all four phases of the process are formally uncontroversial, and will readily be accepted by almost any school or type of psychotherapy, the actual achievement of these recommendations requires contemplation and specifically philosophical reasoning. On a psychological level, in order to cognitively accept and volitionally embrace any direction for new thinking or behavioural change, a degree of 'equilibrium' of emotions is needed. Contrary to what is achieved by the use of psychotropic medication, the lasting equilibrium arises from an elaboration of options and a rational understanding of the limits of the situation one finds oneself in. Just like coping with an emotional loss and the achievement of emotional 'closure' require both a process of grieving and the actual understanding of what has happened to the

person, why and how it fits in one's perceptual and value schema of life, adopting a change in views or behavior when faced with a problem requires a rational conceptualisation of what has happened (is happening), and the achievement of an emotional equilibrium.

Lou Marinoff calls this process of achieving the equilibrium PEACE process, where the explanation for the acronym PEACE is:

P: Identifying the problem;

E: 'Constructively' expressing one's emotions about the problem;

A: Analysis of the available courses of action to address the problem,

C: Contemplation of the 'disposition that allows one to choose the best option', and

E: Achievement of the emotional equilibrium (Marinoff, 2002, p.168).

Marinoff considers the described process to be a 'meta-methodology for philosophical consultants', and indeed it appears capable of serving this purpose. The PEACE method is compatible with the Stoic counsel in that it explains the cognitive process parts of which are at play in the achievement of each of the four stages of the Stoic counsel. The PEACE method is particularly relevant for the Epicurean perspective on the Stoic counsel, because it emphasises the subjective dimension of satisfaction through the concept of equilibrium. Namely, the IDEA method shows in stages how to achieve an understanding of what can and what cannot be changed and how to best economise effort in order to change what can be changed. This rational perspective omits the element of personal emotional benefit: the problem is a problem not only because it causes us 'objective' obstacles (e.g. an obnoxious boss forces us to contemplate how to deal with the possibility of losing the job), but also, and perhaps primarily, because it causes us distress. Some problems, especially those connected with relationships, do not immediately lead to 'objective', external changes, yet they cause deep suffering and anxiety that need to be addressed through the elaboration of context, the meaning of the problem and options to overcome it. After all, by far the most clients in counseling suffer from relationship issues, where the subjective element of suffering prevails over any external consequences. One may stay in a bad marriage and suffer a long time with no external consequences occurring. However, one will have no less of a problem just because the failed marriage does not manifest itself to external observers. The Stoic counsel provides a formal, rational framework of directions to solving outstanding issues, but it omits the subjective element that, according to Epicureans—and, it seems, intuitively to most ordinary people—is essential, namely the element of suffering and the need to overcome it with or without an objective 'solution'.

Stoic counsel and Epicurean ethics appear as complementary philosophical perspectives to be cast simultaneously on most 'internal' issues. On the one hand, such problems cannot be effectively resolved, in most cases, by merely behavioural or cognitive intervention, nor by medication: if so treated, the 'anxiety' of which Epicureans speak may retreat temporarily, however the problem itself will not be addressed and all the emotional issues attendant to it will return once the medication or psychological intervention is over. (Unless, of course, one is kept constantly under medication and/or psychotherapy, which, common as it is, provides additional reasons to worry about the intentions and strategic plans of psychology in its therapeutic modality.) In order to achieve a solution, a 'road map' that will bring the person outside the labyrinth of distress and disempowerment, a rational elaboration of the issues is necessary, and this is appropriately achieved by Stoic counsel, which clears the practical ground for action on a minimalist assumption of needs and resources.

A combination of self-discipline characteristic of Stoicism and the practical common sense enshrined in the IDEA method provides a simple and effective schema to apply philosophical counseling to most cases of distress. However, this schema addresses the cognitive side of the problem alone, and cannot serve, by itself, as a sufficiently complete methodology for counseling. People may adopt the IDEA method, progress through it and successfully reach the necessary conclusions; they may even act accordingly and position themselves 'objectively' outside of, or formally in charge of their initial problem, while remaining emotionally troubled, inhibited, heart-broken. The aim of Epicurean ethics is to address the unhappiness and suffering by both elucidating the sufficiency of a minimalism of needs, which is the common thread with Stoicism, and by accentuating the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction that need to be sought in the process of solving any issue. Epicurean counsel encourages the troubled minds to seek pleasure in the removal of pain arising from every step in the process of cognitively elaborating the problem; it favours the highest form of Epicurean pleasure, the 'pleasure arising from conversations' as inherent in the philosophical dialogue, and directs counselees not only to understand the limitations of their situation and possible courses of action with regard to their initial problem, but also to seek pleasure in new ways that are compatible with the conclusions reached through the philosophical deliberation.

Epicureanism emphasises a key practical element of counseling, and that is that people need to be reminded to take pleasure in small things, and to seek opportunities for pleasures that are benign enough to not likely cause chain effects of pain in the future. For example, a marriage counselee (or couple) will be taught by the Stoic counselor that they ought to work on themselves and perform their best as husband or wife, while accepting the limitations of doing so in the context of the aim to preserve the marriage: if the other person does not want the marriage to survive, it may not survive whatever the person who wishes the marriage to continue may or may not do. Consequently, the Stoic counselor will direct the client to moderate the expenditure of effort in situations where it is clear that the other person wishes a divorce, while at the same time directing one's constructive efforts into other areas, where one has more control, such as work, child-rearing, or caring for someone else, such as an elderly parent. However, on an emotional level, this may do little to eliminate the trauma: the person may be strong and sufficiently disciplined to act rationally as per the Stoic advice; however, they may remain deeply unhappy about the loss of mate and failure of the family.

Epicurean counsel supplements the Stoic counsel on this crucial level: the Epicurean counselor will likely suggest to the counselee to identify what aspects of the relationship that constitutes the marriage are the most important to them and where one finds the most satisfaction, followed by the examination of possible ways in which this aspect of the relationship may be preserved despite the divorce. Additionally, the Epicurean will ask the counselee to identify other sources of satisfaction, either related or unrelated to the relationship in trouble. The counselor will systematically assist the counselee in identifying those, finding their remaining sources, and enjoying them to the safe maximum within the given situation. The satisfactions of this type may include friendships, hobbies, erotic pleasures with the spouse or with another person, a possible alternative relationship, or any of a number of other things that people focused on their problem may not accord proper priority to. While there are many different paths that lead to the top of the mountain, arguably some are more pleasant and picturesque than others. Epicureanism seeks those paths with a better vista and better fruits to be picked on the way to the same summit.

Stoic counsel can serve as a test for the appropriateness of Epicurean counsel in many clients, especially those struggling with emotional issues connected with relationships. I recollect a case of J, a 29 year old female kindergarten teacher, with a recent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, which was the immediate reason for her to seek counseling. Soon after the first session it became clear that she was perfectly

capable of coping with her medical condition, which did not manifest itself in major physical complaints, but she had serious emotional issues connected with a difficult relationship with a married man from a completely different religious, cultural and social background, from a small town in Bosnia. She said she was in love with the man, and was prepared to forfeit almost every aspect of her present life away in order to fulfil his expectations: to change faith, leave her job, move from a big city to a small Bosnian rural community, and marry him in an illegal religious ceremony without him divorcing his present wife. She was hurt that he had lied to her about his family situation when they first met, and by his proposal to be his 'second wife', but was essentially willing to go along with all his demands.

When probed for deontic ethical principles, she said that she understood that what she was about to do was not something she could wish everybody else to do in a similar situation, and she acknowledged that her choice would likely adversely affect the man's children, wife and her own family. Her argument in favour of her choice was that the relationship with the man gave her such joy that she believed it was justified to 'break the ordinary rules of morality' in order to improve one's quality of emotional life dramatically. This clearly indicated a utilitarian type of reasoning as her dominant ethical 'worldview', and henceforth the counseling process adapted to this.

The next approach tried was to explore whether a Stoic way of thinking would be able to stabilise her judgements in line with her utilitarian values. I suggested that she considers very carefully what would in fact improve her quality of life the most, and to pay special attention to the possibility of refraining from extreme affairs so as to avoid being hurt. She seemed very intrigued by the proposition, but returned the next session with a clear: 'not really' answer.

When we discussed what caused her such intense excitement in the relationship it became clear that, in addition to being attracted to the extremely challenging and unconventional aspects of the situation, she was most strongly drawn by the man's intense attraction to her. At the same time, she was puzzled and confused by this. At one stage she said: 'I know this situation would be resolved at once if only I could understand his motives. This way I feel as though I am under his spell'. After the 8th session I introduced the aesthetic and hedonistic facet to the discussion: we started addressing the problem by discussing the reasons she was interesting to her partner. It turned out that she knew nothing about the town the man was from, and when faced with information about the way of life there she decided that she was probably far more 'exotic' to him than he was to her. She realised that the man's unwillingness to divorce matched his perception of the relationship with her as an adventure only, and suddenly saw the prospect of being a 'second wife' as an extremely dark one. Still, she seemed unable to make a decision.

Faced with the moral issue of being responsible for the conflicts and other family issues the man's children would be subjected to, and with the legal repercussions of possible discovery by the Bosnian authorities of a bigamous religious marriage, which is a crime, she said that she would be willing to take all the risks. However, when we discussed the everyday life in the town she contemplated moving to, the fact that this was a place with one hairdresser, a petrol station and a bar, no house help, and a culture of strong mail dominance, where she would spend most of her days doing housework, would have virtually no time or opportunity for sports, and would have no opportunity for beauty or spa treatments, she reacted unexpectedly strongly: 'No way that I can live that way! He wants to use me to improve his quality of life, but soon he would lose any interest in me because I would become the same as all of the local women'. She made the decision at that session and never returned to counseling. She let me know a month later that she had resolved the problem definitively.

Although this case may seem trivial, because it belongs to the most numerous category of 'relationship cases' and the motives involved seem extremely mundane, it is interesting from the point of view of methodology of counseling and the outcome. J. was willing to accept the moral responsibility for the partner's children, change of religion, loss of support by her own parents and brother, however, she was totally unwilling to live without certain 'perks' of the big city. Relaxed in a non-judgmental counseling setting, she made substantively the same decision that most moralists would suggest to her. This was the decision that was probably 'objectively' the best for everyone concerned, including the man and his family: she broke up the relationship. However, nobody outside the counseling room knew about the reason she decided this. The reasons were entirely hedonistic. They were based on purely Epicurean grounds: she calculated what mattered to her happiness the most, and decided that the unhappiness she would endure as a result of the decision to proceed with the relationship would far outweigh the joy of it.

One could argue that J's decision is not inherently moralistic, because it was not motivated by the consideration of the interests and rights of others, although in its final outcome it is the best and morally most satisfying decision for everybody concerned. This illustrates how Epicurean ethics, while perhaps unable to serve as the ethical criterion for right and wrong in a sufficiently intuitively acceptable sense, may still be a useful counseling strategy to resolve internal conflicts that may or may not lead to results that will be as satisfying to all stake-holders in the situation as any outcome produced by deontic moral reasoning might. In J's case, the deontic moralism was tried and it failed, so there remained little choice of methodology for the counseling. In other cases the choice might exist, but the pursuit of pleasure as the counselee's dominant value may be as valuable, or more so, than a traditionally moralistic approach in helping the client reach the most optimal outcomes, such as J. did.

'External morality' and Epicurean counsel

The 'self-sacrificial morality' that has come to dominate modern ethics is based entirely on the internalisation of external expectations and on pressures to limit one's spontaneous desires and needs in the fear that they may disturb external expectations or appear inappropriate. One of the consequences of insistence on duty-bound ethics, on issues of responsibility, respect for others' rights, limiting one's pursuits that may challenge the social *status quo* or communal peace, has been the gradual entrenchment of a profound feeling of guilt on an individual level. Guilt is connected to fear of social reprisals, and if sufficiently deeply rooted it leads to fear of the internal sanction, of self-reproach and the withdrawal of self-esteem and self-confidence. Through this mechanism the morally oppressive modern western society has generated the epidemic of depressions and mood disorders that keep millions of people at the psychiatrist's couch. The social learning of values, a powerful process of internalisation of social expectations, has turned many members of modern communities into horrified shadows: guilt and fear loom large as the main emotional problems of our age.

The dominance of highly imposing external moral demands—some that could be called 'moral absolutism' (Fishkin, 1984), make many people feel deprived. Little normative room is left for the pursuit of 'selfish pleasure'. The fulfillment of external moral obligations, on a subjective level, leads to a 'way of life (…) respected and admired: or at least the minimum features of a respectworthy way of life…' (Hampshire, 1978, p. 11). Such a respectful way of life is free of blame, and thus of internalised and learned guilt. It is appropriate to remember here that Epicurus also considered fear of reproach arising from transgressions of socially imposed values ('fear of gods'—at the time) one of the main reasons for unhappiness, and that Epicureans expended most of their energy arguing to dispel fear of gods and fear of death. Two of the four maxims that constitute the Tetrapharmacos address these two types of fear.

One may note that as early as in Hellenism the 'external' ethics of virtue (arising from the fulfillment of moral expectations of the community), or *arête*, preceded the Epicurean ethics of 'the good life' (*eudaimonia*). Epicurus in fact argued in favour of seeking a good life filled with moderate pleasures in opposition to the already dominant external ethics that placed pressures arising from moral expectations on the individual. The wheel seems to have turned once again since then and the dominant modern ethics is again an 'external' ethics of demands posed on the individual. The exclusively 'external', duty-driven morality's greatest weakness appears to be that it reconciles itself very easily with the possibility of living a perfectly moral life that is at the same time perfectly unhappy. From an Epicurean point of view, there is something fundamentally wrong with this perspective.

On the one hand, in the modern, complex circumstances of life that are highly suggestive of guilt and responsibility (external moral pressures), the expectations of the community are entrenched so deeply in everyday life that the achievement of moral justification of actions is a pre-requisite for the achievement of a peace of mind (*ataraxia*), which, along with the absence of 'disturbances of the flesh' (*aponia*), was for Epicureans sufficient for happiness. In the modern context, dominated by external moral demands of the individual, a pre-requisite for the achievement of peace is to satisfy an optimum of external demands (Alexander, 2011). On the other hand, to make life valuable in an Epicurean perspective, one needs to develop a way in which the situation of the piece of mind achieved through the fulfillment of the external moral demands is capable of being transformed into positive pleasure, enjoyment of the peace and quiet. This is a key practical aspect of Epicurean ethics.

Epicureans distinguished between the static (katastematic) and dynamic (kinetic) pleasures, where, crucially, aponia and ataraxia (lack of disturbance and need on both the physical and mental levels) are katastematic pleasures, however their full appreciation arises from the development of consciousness that such states have been achieved and enjoying them (Cicero. *On Moral Ends,* 11.3-2; 11.9-10; 16,75). The enjoyment of the two katastematic states is considered by Epicureans to be a dynamic (kinetic) pleasure. This means that it is possible to achieve a state that allows one to be happy, without being aware of one's happiness, namely without consciously enjoying the blessings that one has—a common theme in modern literature, but also a regular issue in modern psychotherapy. This is another key aspect of Epicurean philosophical counsel.

While morality (in a broad sense, the quest of *arête*) provides conditions for the achievement of *ataraxia*, it is conscious philosophical practice, including both counseling and solo practice, that allows one to develop the 'wisdom' of enjoying one's happy condition of life. Epicureans placed great emphasis on the practice: the *Vatican Sentences*, and especially the *Principal Doctrines*, were collections of sayings apparently intended to be memorised and practiced in one's mind until they 'drive out deeply rooted empty opinion' and integrate the skills to enjoy peace of mind and the body into one's habitual models of perceiving and reacting to the world:

> Then practice these things and all that belongs with them to yourself day and night, and to someone like yourself. Then you will never be disturbed waking or dreaming, and you will live amongst men like a god (*Letter to Monoeceus*, in Bailey, 1926, p. 135).

Epicureans have developed numerous recommendations as to how to assist counselees (or 'students') to achieve the described hedonistic state of mind. In Philodemus's treatise on friendship entitled *On Frank Speaking*, it is made clear that those who lead others in the achievement of hedonistic skills must first be free of the empty opinions that they purport to expel from others, and must judge critically the timing and circumstances of their intervention: with those who are delicate, the emphasis should be on friendship,

support and 'mild irony', while with those of 'more robust constitution' a directness that is sometimes 'brutal' is recommended. An inadequate manner of critique risks to

> inflame (the students being criticised) when they themselves (the teachers) are guilty of the same things, and do not love them or know how to correct them (the students) or indeed have any chance of persuading persons who are much superior to themselves, instead of to someone who is purged and cherishes and is superior and knows how to apply therapy (Philodemus, *On Frank Speaking*, Fragment 44).

These are in fact practical instructions for counselors that link the counseling method with the sensibilities of the counselees, all of which have since been taken over by psychotherapy. Epicurean counsel is thus a model fully equipped with the instruments to provide effective guidance to those in need of amending their lives so as to make them happier and more fulfilling, and such are, in essence, all philosophical counselees. In a proper therapeutic community, such as the Epicurean Garden was conceived to be, the inner circle of teachers could gain intimate knowledge of the characters of each particular student (counselee), and use the numerous possibilities that presented themselves in the course of spending most of their time together to apply the best approach to the particular person in the best of circumstances. Philodemus even suggests that the relationship between the teacher and student (or counselor and counselee, for this is what the 'therapeutic' relationship was explicitly understood to be) implied the understanding that the student was under obligation to regularly confess all of one's mistakes. The therapeutic effect of the confessional has since been constantly recognised not only in the various religions, but also in psychotherapeutic (especially in psychoanalytic) practice. The confessional was highly desirable in the Garden:

> Heraclides is praised because he supposed the criticisms he would incur as a result of what was going to come to light were less important than the benefit he would get from them, and so informed Epicurus of his mistakes (Philodemus, *On Frank Speaking*, Fragment 49).

Epicurean philosophical counsel, as we have seen, is capable of integrating modern external morality. However, the Epicurean counsel transcends an exclusively external, duty-driven morality in that it provides a further goal, namely the achievement of a piece of mind and an optimum satisfaction of bodily needs (one could call this 'equilibrium') as a basis for what Epicureans see as the meaning of life, and that is joy in the peaceful condition so obtained. To feel this joy is to achieve happiness in its ultimate form, and a prerequisite for the achievement of this ultimate objective is the learning and exercise in developing specific sensibilities for happiness.

On physical and cosmological levels Epicureanism is intimately connected with ethics: the idea that the soul is an aggregation of atoms dissipated by death provides a basis for arguing that death does not include any sensations, because the soul that ceases to exist is no longer capable of feeling anything. Epicurean physics is unacceptable to most modern counselees, whose physical and metaphysical ideas are shaped by the long history of very different philosophical and religious views. In this context, Epicureanism as a comprehensive philosophy does not satisfy the necessary criteria of plausibility for a viable comtemporary worldview. However, Epicurean ethics, regardless of its less than plausible physical foundation, is entirely reconcilable with a variety of metaphysical worldviews, including most of the large global religions: seeking a life of moderate satisfaction, a reduction of all unnecessary needs, and learning, within a circle of friends, the skills of appreciating the happiness arising from the absence of pain and disturbance, are all almost universally integrated practical precepts in most of the dominant religions. There is thus some reason for Pierre Gassendi's attempts to reconcile Epicurean ethics with the Christian faith (Gassendi, 1972), though

admittedly there are aspects of Epicureanism that appear to militate against any substantive morality that is compatible with Christianity. For example, the view that:

> Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions (*Principal Doctrine* 34).

Lines like the above appear to discredit Epicureanism as an ethics of the right and wrong. After all, Epicureans did not perceive ethics in this sense at all. However, in a therapeutic sense, which was in fact the main objective of Epicurus' teaching, Epicurean ethics in the form of a philosophy of life remains highly valuable for philosophical counseling. It is particularly well suited to address issues of guilt, fear and anxiety arising from the high external pressures of the modern age. As the example of J, discussed earlier on, shows, it is possible for Epicureanism to be the counseling philosophy of choice (or, as in J's case, the only appropriate method), with a strong 'therapeutic' impact, while reaching almost universally beneficial external outcomes. There is thus a big difference in perspective between a morality of the moral right and wrong and an eudaimonistic morality as a practical counseling or 'therapeutic' method. Epicureanism is not a good candidate for the former, but is an excellent example of the latter.

Epicurean ethics provides not only well-tested inroads into problems of emotional deprivation and lack of fulfillment that are endemic in our day and age; it also provides non-medical (and not medicated) instruments for the development of skills necessary for making life meaningful and fulfilling, while retaining Democritus' sentiment that practical wisdom requires us to avoid, whenever possible 'large movements of the soul'. Thus Epicurean teaching appears very useful and flexible within the various contexts of modern philosophical counsel.

Note

1. *Principal Doctrines* are preserved in entirety in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers*, vol. 2, books 6–10.

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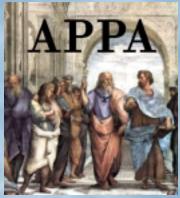
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