

Epicurean Advice for the Modern Consumer

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For the Epicureans, the point of doing philosophy is to drive out the diseases of the mind that prevent us from achieving happiness. (Porphyry *To Marcella* 3) Like all other animals, humans seek pleasure and shun pain, but we do so in misguided ways. Epicurean therapy aims at diagnosing and removing the false beliefs and foolish desires that bring us misery.

Epicurus thought that the conventional values of Greek society—in particular, its celebration of luxury and wealth—often led people astray. It is by rejecting these values, reducing our desires, and leading a moderately ascetic life that we can attain happiness. Epicurus' message was not meant only for his Greek compatriots, however, but for all people. And it is especially pertinent for those of us in modern Western culture, with an economy based on constant consumption and an advertising industry that molds us to serve that economy by enlarging our desires.

In this chapter, I'll start by outlining some of the basic tenets of Epicurean ethics. Then I will explain how these tenets lead to an Epicurean diagnosis of what ails modern consumers and present the cure they would propose. Finally, I will argue that the Epicurean position is supported by recent psychological research in well-being.

Happiness and Types of Pleasure¹

Like almost all ancient ethicists, Epicurus is a eudaimonist, holding that the highest good is *eudaimonia*, or happiness. He is also a hedonist, because he identifies the happy life with the pleasant life: only pleasure is intrinsically good, and only pain intrinsically bad. (*Fin.* 1.30)² But Epicureanism is a form of *prudent* hedonism, of intelligently picking and choosing among pleasures and pains in order to make one's life as a whole pleasant. Shooting up heroin and punching out people who annoy you may feel pleasant, but they lead to opioid addiction and jail, and so the wise person avoids them. (*Ep. Men.* 129–130) Epicurus' denunciation of luxury, however, is not based merely upon common-sense observations such as that overindulgence in wine leads to a hangover. Instead, it is rooted in his idiosyncratic analysis of types of pleasure and of types of desires.

Epicurus first distinguishes between bodily and mental pleasures and pains. Bodily pleasures and pains are confined to the present, in the sense that they arise only from the present state of the body, such as the feeling of hunger or the agony of being kicked in the shins by somebody wearing Doc Martens. Mental pleasures and pains, however, are not confined to the present, but can arise from the recollection or anticipation of pleasures and pains. If you train yourself to recall sweet memories, you will always have pleasure available to you. (*Fin.* 1.57) And if my Doc Martens-wearing student credibly threatens to gather his friends

¹ Some material in this chapter is adapted from O'Keefe (2016), O'Keefe (forthcoming-a), and O'Keefe (forthcoming-b).

² Henceforward, references to these and other texts will be made according to the following conventions: Cicero, *De Finibus* (On Goals) = *Fin.*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* = DL; Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* (Principle Doctrines) = *KD*; Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* (Vatican Sayings) = *SV*; Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* = *Ep. Men.*; Philodemus, *On Property Management* = *De Oec.*

and give me a beatdown because I failed him, my anxiety at the prospect of the beatdown may cause me more pain than the beatdown itself. For the sake of leading a happy life, Epicurus thinks that mental pleasures and pains are more important than bodily pleasures and pains.

(*Fin.* 1.55)

Most people identify pleasure with some active titillation of the senses or the mind, like the sensation of eating a hamburger when hungry or the delight in recalling time with your friends. Epicurus labels these sorts of pleasures “kinetic” pleasures. But Epicurus holds that there is another type of pleasure: the absence of pain is not merely a neutral state between pleasure and pain, but itself pleasurable. When I am hungry, the hunger is painful, and I enjoy eating a hamburger as I am relieving my hunger. But afterwards, my bodily state of not being in want or need is itself pleasurable. That is because absence of distress is something we rejoice at, and hence a sort of pleasure. (*Fin.* 1.37) In fact, the removal of all pain is the limit of pleasure (*KD* 3), and once we reach this state of “static” pleasure, our pleasure can be varied but not increased. (*KD* 18) Specifically, “static” pleasures come in two varieties. The first is bodily static pleasure (*aponia*), not being hungry, thirsty, cold, etc. The second is mental static pleasure (*ataraxia*, or tranquility), not being anxious, fearful, full of regret, etc. Both are good, but as a mental pleasure, *ataraxia* is by far more important. This is illustrated by a letter Epicurus wrote as he was dying: he suffered great physical pain in his last days, but he was able to counterbalance his physical suffering with the joy he felt at recalling his past philosophical conversations. He did not fear his impending death, he was able to look back on his life with gratitude, and so he called himself supremely happy. (*DL* 10.22) So while Epicureanism is a form

of hedonism, Epicurus ends up recommending that we should aim at attaining peace of mind, because peace of mind is what really makes our life pleasant.

The Life of Luxury vs. the Life of Happiness

What determines whether you are reach this state of tranquility is the sort of person you are, whether you are virtuous or vicious, and an important part of being a virtuous person is having the right desires. So to attain virtue, we need to have a correct understanding of what types of desires there are and how we should handle them.

Some desires, like the desires for food, drink, and shelter, are natural and necessary. They are natural in the sense that human beings congenitally have them rather than learning them from society, and they are necessary in that fulfilling them is needed either to live at all or to free the body from troubles. (*Ep. Men.* 127) If I do not eat or drink, I will soon die, and while I may live for some time without adequate clothing or shelter, I will be cold and miserable. Fulfilling these desires liberates us from pain (scholion to *KD* 29), and so we should strive to fulfill these desires and to arrange our lives so that can we be confident that they will be fulfilled. When we fulfill these desires, we have *aponia*, the limit of bodily pleasure, and when we are confident about the future, it brings us *ataraxia*, the limit of mental pleasure. Fortunately for us, these desires are naturally limited and easy to fulfill. (*KD* 21, *SV* 59) Rice and beans will fill your belly and keep you healthy, water will keep you hydrated, and simple clothing and shelter are enough to protect you from the elements. The wise person will also be

part of a network of trustworthy friends, who all agree to look out for one another and help each other through any tough times that might arise.³ (*Fin.* 1.65-70)

Unfortunately, we live in a society that encourages us to want more than the basics: we crave meat, expensive wine, designer jeans, and a McMansion. Epicurus labels these sorts of desires “natural and unnecessary.” They are natural insofar as desiring food, hydration, and shelter are natural—but we do not *need* these particular things, so they are unnecessary. Meat or expensive wine are not needed to maintain our life or to avoid bodily pain. Eating meat and drinking wine vary our pleasure—we have a different sort of pleasant experience when eating filet mignon than when eating rice and beans—but because we reach the limit of bodily pleasure when we attain the healthy state of not being in want or need, they do not *increase* our pleasure. (Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 1.51; *KD* 26)

The Epicureans’ attitude towards such desires is ambivalent, but more negative than positive. On the one hand, they do not advocate anything approaching a total ban on indulging in luxury. The wise person, who needs extravagance least of all, will be able to enjoy extravagance the most when it happens to come along. (*Ep. Men.* 130-1) In a letter, Epicurus asks a friend to send him a small pot of cheese, so that he may enjoy a feast. (DL 10.11) And when he was about to die, Epicurus requested some unmixed wine, tossed it back, asked his friends to remember his teachings, and died. (DL 10.15-16) Epicurus says we should not “force” nature, but “persuade” her, and this involves fulfilling the natural but unnecessary desires, as long as fulfilling them does not harm us. (SV 21) Furthermore, while fulfilling these desires isn’t

³ For a detailed discussion of the taxonomy of Epicurean desires, see Rider’s chapter in this volume, “Epicureans on pleasure, desire, and happiness.”

necessary, they should be easy to dispel if we realize that achieving them would be difficult or harmful. (KD 26)

These passages suggest a rather permissive attitude towards luxury. If I happen to like fine Thai food, and a friend comes by with some Tom Yum soup, there is no reason not to have some, as long as it doesn't harm my health. If it turns out that the soup is bad for my cholesterol level, or if there isn't any Tom Yum soup nearby, I should be able to let go of my hankering for it.

But Epicurus is well aware that things don't always work out that way. We do not simply *decide* that a simple life is enough for our needs and thereby find a simple life satisfying. We must become *accustomed* to a simple way of life (*Ep. Men.* 131), and we can likewise become accustomed to an extravagant way of life. We can also acquire false beliefs about such desires, and then they might be hard to dispel, even when they are hard to fulfill. (KD 30) For instance, imagine that I become accustomed to nice Thai food, and I come to believe that eating fancy food is part of the good life. Then, when I accept the only tenure-track job I am offered in rural west-central Minnesota, I will be dissatisfied with my new life. The closest decent Thai restaurant is over an hour drive away, and the local supermarket does not carry the ingredients needed to cook the dishes I like. As I sit in the local diner with my colleagues, eating scrambled eggs and undercooked hash browns, I curse west-central Minnesota. Hearing my lamentations, Epicurus would chastise me: there is nothing inherently wrong with the area I am living in. After all, many people live there perfectly happily. Instead, there is something wrong with *me*: I have outsized desires that keep me from being satisfied, and I need to change myself if I want to be happy.

These sorts of desires, that are based upon false beliefs that we acquire from our culture, Epicurus labels vain and empty desires, and they must be eliminated. (This suggests that the desire for particular sorts of food and other goods can be either natural and unnecessary, or vain and empty, depending on whether the desire is associated with a false and harmful belief that makes it difficult to eliminate.⁴) Vain and empty desires are difficult to fulfill, and when they are not fulfilled, this makes me unhappy. And even if I am able to fulfill them, they will still make me unhappy, because I will be anxious that in the future they might not be fulfilled, ruining my peace of mind.⁵

Furthermore, consumer goods are often valued as “positional goods,” where the point is not simply to have the good for its own sake, but in order to have more than other people. For instance, if I buy a fancy sports car, I probably do so not only because I crave the buttery feel of the leather seats on my thighs, the excellent acceleration, and the nimble handling as I weave in and out of traffic on the interstate. Instead, I want to think to myself, and for other people to know, that *I can afford a fancy sports car*, as they trundle down the road in their Honda Accords. (Veblen 1899 remains the classic study of such “conspicuous consumption.”) This sort of desire would be like the desires for fame and political power, which Epicurus condemns because they have no natural limit and bring us into conflict with others. If I want to signal my social status, there will always be somebody with an even more expensive car, or perhaps a fleet of them, to make me feel small. So to pursue such desires is a losing proposition.

⁴ For more on this topic, see Annas 1993: 191-3 and O’Keefe forthcoming-a.

⁵ For more on what exactly the Epicurean attitude is towards natural and unnecessary desires, see Rider forthcoming: 10-14 and Cooper 1999: 498-508, who give relatively permissive interpretations, and Mitsis 1988: 11-58 and O’Keefe 2010: 124-127, who give relatively suspicious interpretations.

It might be objected that the Epicurean lifestyle—repeated meals of rice and beans, with the occasional hunk of cheese to spice things up—would be bland and boring. If it seems that way to you, Epicurus would reply that you’re a fool who needs deprogramming from our culture’s values. You should be happy that you live in a time and place where you can easily obtain the necessities of life, which many people have difficulty obtaining. Ingratitude is what makes people greedy for unlimited variation in their lifestyle.⁶ (SV 69) With the right mindset, you can be happy with little. And in any case, there are many other things to occupy the time of a person who follows Epicurus’ recommendations, such as interacting with friends, enjoying the wonders of the natural world, and studying philosophy.

Money

Obviously, the pursuit of wealth is central to modern consumer culture, and the Epicureans have thought long and hard about the role money should play in obtaining happiness. Just as with the natural but unnecessary desires, their attitude is ambivalent.

Because of her reduced desires, the wise Epicurean will not need great wealth, and her recognition of the natural limits of her desires will bring her temperance and the other virtues. Seneca reports that Epicurus boasted that he could be fed for less than an obol but that his disciple Metrodorus, who hadn’t made as much progress, needed an entire obol. (*Letters on Ethics* 18.9) But it makes sense to ensure that you have some money, so that you can obtain the food and shelter your body requires and don’t need to worry about hunger, thirst, and exposure to the elements. Although most of us suffer from the opposite problem, it is possible to be *too* frugal. (SV 63) The Epicurean Metrodorus criticizes the Cynics, an ancient

⁶ See Rider forthcoming for more on the place of gratitude in Epicurean ethics.

philosophical movement that also condemns conventional attitudes towards wealth, but who advocate heedlessly living in poverty so as to avoid the trouble that comes with pursuing wealth. Such an attitude is foolish, says Metrodorus, because you occasionally have to do things that are a little annoying in order to avoid greater pain in the future, as in the case of bodily health, where small hassles like making sure to brush your teeth nightly and picking up a new tube of toothpaste occasionally are worth it to avoid the pain of rotting teeth. Wealth, says Metrodorus, is like health: it's prudent to expend some effort to have the resources to satisfy your natural and necessary desires. (*De Oec.* XIII 1-15) Such limited "natural wealth" is easy to obtain and is worth pursuing, whereas wealth as defined by popular opinion has no limit. (*KD* 15)

The Epicureans' admission that the wise person will pursue wealth in order to face the future with confidence may seem to open the door for pursuing great wealth. After all, if saving up \$10,000 helps me know that I can afford my food and rent for the next year, wouldn't \$1,000,000 in savings be even better, because that would be enough to provide for my needs the rest of my life, even if things go seriously awry? But Epicurus denies that the wise person would have great wealth: the happy life is free, and it's hard to obtain great wealth without becoming enslaved to the mob or to people who have power. And if the wise person did somehow luck into great wealth, he'd share it out to obtain the goodwill of his neighbors. (*SV* 67)

The later Epicurean Philodemus adds to this that there is a skill whose aim is accumulating and managing wealth: *oikonomia*, or the craft of property management. But if you dedicate yourself to developing this skill, it will make you worse as a human being. You will

worry about maximizing your wealth, turning yourself into a money-lover. (*De Oec.* XVII 13) Eagerly watching over your possessions at all times is troubling and worrisome (*De Oec.* XIX 10-16), and wanting to increase your property as much as possible makes you agonize over your losses. (*De Oec.* XIV 30-37) The wise person realizes that she needs little to live well, and that even if hard times befall her, she can count on her friends to come to her aid. So she won't be obsessed with maximizing her wealth, and she won't be distressed when she loses some wealth. (*De Oec.* XIV 23-30) That doesn't mean she's be totally ignorant about financial matters or that she'll foolishly waste her property: she'll have a good-enough know-how, easily developed through common experience, that lets her get by financially.⁷ (*De Oec.* XVI 35-39).

The Epicurean Cure

The Epicureans would diagnose modern consumers as suffering from wanting things they don't really need, falsely believing that these things are good for them, and excessively pursuing money in order to gratify these desires. This affliction leads them to anxiety and to dissatisfaction with what they do have. What is their proposed cure?

The first step is to accept the diagnosis: you need to change who you are in order to achieve the life that you really want. The Epicureans are optimistic about the power of reason to shape our character. Practical wisdom is the source of all of the other virtues. (*Ep. Men.* 132) Practical wisdom is a matter of knowing what's truly good and evil, understanding the natural limits of our desires, and being able to weigh the consequences of possible courses of action in order to discern what you should do in every situation, and the other virtues come about through calculating what's in your self-interest. (DL 10.120)

⁷ See O'Keefe 2016 for more on natural wealth and Philodemus' thoughts on the craft of property management.

But, of course, accepting the Epicurean position in general terms is not going to instantly transform your character. For one thing, the Epicureans are well aware that people can have inconsistent beliefs. For instance, the Epicurean poet Lucretius describes a man who believes that death is annihilation, but whose horror at the thought of his corpse being torn limb from limb by a pack of wild dogs shows that he still has some unacknowledged belief that a part of him survives his death. (*DRN* 3.870-893) Philodemus' arguments about the fear of death also show a sensitivity to inconsistent beliefs. The Epicureans have some general all-purpose arguments that are supposed to show that death is not bad for the person who dies. (Briefly: death cannot be bad for the living person because it has not yet occurred, and it cannot be bad for the dead person because dead people don't exist and thus cannot be harmed.⁸) But Philodemus goes on to address many particular forms of the fear of death, for example, fear of death at sea. (He says that death at sea is not particularly bad, because you can equally well drown in a bathtub, and having your body devoured by fish is no worse than by maggots and grubs.) If the general argument is accepted, it would seem to make addressing the particular fear unnecessary—but people can inconsistently believe both that death (in general) is not bad and that death at sea (in particular) is bad, so Philodemus gives both the general and specific arguments.⁹

The same thing holds with our desires for luxury and wealth. Epicurus thinks that you need to understand yourself in order to achieve happiness, and to ask of every desire that you have, what will happen if you achieve the object of your desire, and what will happen if you don't? (*SV* 71) This will hopefully lead you to conclude, for instance, that not having the fancy

⁸ For more on this, see Austin's chapter in this volume, "Epicurus on the fear of death."

⁹ For more on Philodemus on death, see Tsouna 2007 chapter 10, pp. 239-311.

sports car wouldn't be so bad, even if having one might be slightly more convenient and comfortable.

Once we have identified the bad habits that harm us, we must eliminate them. (SV 46)

As noted above, this involves starting to work at living the simple life, so that you become accustomed to it. What helps a lot here is putting yourself in a healthy environment that encourages simple living. Epicurus himself did not merely spell out a philosophy that talked about the way the world was, how we could gain knowledge of the world, and how to live so as to attain happiness. Instead, Epicurus founded a philosophical community, the Garden, where people lived together in order to put his precepts into action, and later Epicureans formed similar communities throughout the Greek and Latin-speaking world.

Teachers in these communities helped their pupils develop the virtues, and this help was not limited to philosophical argumentation. Philodemus notes that sometimes imagery is more effective than argumentation in treating a person who suffers from destructive passions or appetites: a person prone to harmful bouts of anger may not appreciate how badly off they are if their philosophical "doctor" merely reasons with them about the effects of anger, whereas if the doctor brings the badness of anger before their eyes via a vivid depiction of its effects, he will make them eager to be treated.¹⁰ But imagery can also foster destructive desires. Advertising does not give arguments in favor of buying a sports car or lite beer; it shows a successful, debonair man tooling down the road, or witty, sexually attractive people eyeing each other, each with a beer in their hand. It is going to be difficult to reduce your

¹⁰ *De ira* IV 4-19. For more on this technique, see Tsouna 2007: 204-9, and more generally on Philodemus' treatise *On Anger*, pp. 195-238.

desires if you are constantly bombarded with these images and you're surrounded by co-workers who talk about their latest home renovations and the size of their annual bonuses.

Finally, you should develop a circle of friends you can count on, and you do this by being a good, reliable friend yourself. As noted above, the Epicureans think that friendship allows you to face the future with confidence. Epicurus admits that wealth can bring you *some* security (*KD* 14), but pursuing great wealth ultimately causes us more trouble, and it cannot bring us peace of mind. (*SV* 81) By removing fear of the future, friendship undercuts one of the main motives for accumulating wealth.

It might be objected that if everyone (or even most people) accepted the cure and became Epicureans, this would have a detrimental impact on society. When consumer spending goes down significantly, this leads to a recession or depression and all of the resulting hardship. A world of Epicureans would certainly put an end to the highly productive economy that has pulled many people across the globe out of dire poverty. Greed is not good, but it sure is an effective motivator.

The Epicureans would give a two-fold response. First of all, if I and some of my friends decide to opt out of modern consumer culture, it's not as if that will tank the national or global economy. There are, and will continue to be, plenty of foolish people. To deliberately make myself miserable and ruin the one life I have because capitalism requires people to be greedy in order to function would be profoundly stupid. Let other people take the hit, if that's true.

Secondly, they would deny that a world full of Epicureans would be an economic disaster. The Epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda writes that, if all people were to become wise, humans would achieve the life of the gods. They would not need laws or punishments to

restrain one another from hurting each other, and being rational, they would freely cooperate in performing the activities, such as farming, needed to feed them all and fulfill the other natural and necessary desires. (Diogenes of Oinoanda fr. 56) There would far less stuff in the ideal Epicurean community, but everyone would have enough to satisfy their needs.

Psychological Research Supporting the Epicurean Advice

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of “happiness studies” in psychology, where “happiness” is usually equated with “subjective well-being” and often measured by asking people how satisfied they are with their lives or with specific life-domains. Self-reports of life satisfaction have methodological and philosophical limitations: people may be self-deceived or dishonest in their reports, their reports may be influenced by extraneous factors, and we should not, without further argument, conclude from the fact that people *believe* their lives are satisfactory that they *are* going well.¹¹ Nonetheless, we can use these results as a rough proxy for the sort of happiness Epicurus was interested in: generally, people who are suffering from fear, anxiety, and regret would report that they’re dissatisfied with their lives, while people who are able to get what they want, are confident that they will continue to do so, and thus feel tranquility would report that they are satisfied with their lives. These studies provide support for both the Epicurean diagnosis and cure of the modern consumer.

An important recent research topic is materialism, which is defined as an ideology with three core tenets: “(1) material possessions lead to happiness; (2) success is best defined in material terms; and (3) acquisition of material goods is central.” (Richins and Dawson 1992: 303) This is strikingly akin to Epicurus’ characterization of people who have acquired false

¹¹ See chapter 5 of Haybron 2008: 79-103 for further elaboration of some of these limitations.

beliefs that various luxury goods are necessary for happiness, moving their desires for these goods from being natural but unnecessary desires to vain and empty desires. Numerous studies have established a negative correlation between materialism and happiness. (See Dittmar *et al.* 2014 for a recent meta-analysis, and Kasser 2018 for an overview of the literature.)

That materialism is negatively correlated with well-being is clear, but *why* it isn't. One suggestion with considerable empirical support, however, is that materialistic values conflict with community-oriented values that require generosity and cooperation with others and thus make it more difficult to live together with other people. (Kasser 2018 and Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002) Recent research has also supported Epicurus' ideas on gratitude. Gratitude and materialism are negatively correlated, and gratitude is a cause of happiness. (Polak and McCollough 2006) Furthermore, test subjects who were experimentally induced to feel gratitude felt greater satisfaction with life and this in turn resulted in lower materialism. (Lambert *et al.* 2009) This is a short-term effect, but it suggests that more concentrated efforts to develop a deep-seated disposition to feel gratitude towards the good things in your life should decrease your materialism.

The Epicureans hold that the limited "natural wealth" needed to obtain the necessities of life is beneficial but that unlimited wealth as defined by popular opinion is not. Research has shown that the wealth of a nation and its level of subjective well-being are positively correlated. However, this correlation holds mostly when comparing nations where the level of poverty means that many people have difficulty obtaining the necessities of life to developed nations where most people are able to do so. Within countries, the correlation between wealth and subjective well-being is small, especially once one moves above the poorest group. Finally,

in the most economically developed nations, economic growth has not led to appreciable increase in subjective well-being. Summarizing the upshot of these studies, Diener and Biswas Diener (2002: 119) write, “more money may enhance SWB [subjective well-being] when it means avoiding poverty and living in a developed nation, but income appears to increase SWB little over the long-term when more of it is gained by well-off individuals...” They also note that these findings are compatible with two theories: either that money increases happiness (i) only to the extent that it fulfills a person’s basic needs, or (ii) to the extent that it satisfies a person’s desires (since people’s desires often increase as they acquire more wealth). Either theory would be grist for the Epicureans’ mill. If the first is true, then seeking wealth beyond the “natural wealth” needed for our basic needs would be misguided. And even if the second is true, dedicating yourself to acquiring more wealth to satisfy your desires would be misguided. That’s because valuing wealth brings unhappiness, as the research on materialism shows, and so the smart play is to reduce your desires so that they are easily satisfied with little money rather than pursuing money to satisfy your outsized desires.

One of the main Epicurean methods for ridding ourselves of outsized desires is to acquire self-knowledge—to examine our beliefs, desires, and ways of life, and to see how they often lead us into distress and prevent us from getting what we really want. This is, broadly speaking, similar to cognitive-behavioral therapy, whose “defining feature ... is the proposition that symptoms and dysfunctional behaviors are often cognitively mediated and, hence, improvement can be produced by modifying dysfunctional thinking and beliefs.” (Butler *et al.* 2006: 19) The effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy is well-established. Butler *et al.* conducted a review of the meta-analyses and concluded that cognitive-behavioral therapy is

effective, and often more effective than alternative treatments, for a wide variety of disorders, such as depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and social phobia.

The Epicureans would also recommend putting ourselves in healthy environments and avoiding unhealthy environments, and warn that contemporary consumer culture is extremely unhealthy—a warning borne out by the research. Watching more television and consuming more advertising leads to more materialism (Kasser 2016), and increases in advertising expenditures within a country have been shown to be followed by significant declines in reported levels of life-satisfaction. (Michel *et al.* 2019) Increased Facebook usage is associated with decreased physical health, decreased mental health, decreased life-satisfaction, and increased Body-Mass Index. (Shakya and Christakis 2017) Why exactly social media makes you unhappy has not been decisively established, but two hypotheses are that on-line interaction detracts from face-to-face interactions, and that viewing the carefully curated life-stories of our “friends” on Facebook leads us to be dissatisfied with our own humdrum and wart-filled lives.

Conclusion

Epicurus thought that his fellow Greeks lived in a sick society that valued the wrong things, and his message is, if anything, even more applicable to us in modern consumer culture. We live in a society that encourages us to increase our desires without limit so that we can serve the economy, rather than having an economy designed to serve us. The point of seeing through our society’s materialist ideology is not to look down on other people. If we don’t share his desire, it may be easy to laugh at a middle-aged academic with gold chains and a hankering for a fancy sports car with plush leather seats. But Epicurus would say that almost nobody in modern Western culture is completely healthy, and we all have similarly foolish

desires, whether it be for gourmet food, kitchen gadgets, bleeding-edge electronic equipment, high-end hobby gear, or something else. If we want to be happy, we need to reject our culture's values and reduce our desires so that, along with our friends, we can be content with the little we need.

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