

WAS EPICURUS A BUDDHIST? AN EXAMINATION AND CRITIQUE OF THE THEORIES OF NEGATIVE HAPPINESS IN BUDDHA AND EPICURUS

ADAM BARKMAN¹

(Yonsei University - South Korea)

Abstract

Comparisons between western and eastern philosophies are uncommon and this, among other things, hinders global philosophical discourse. Thus, in this essay I want to compare the philosophies of the Buddha and Epicurus for similarities, particular in regard to what I call “negative happiness.” Once I have established this, I want to give a brief critique of negative happiness, which subsequently amounts to a selective critique of Buddhism and Epicureanism.

Was Epicurus a Buddhist? Of course, the answer is “no.” However, I posed this question as the title of this paper for two reasons. First, despite the cries of those who somehow see “western” philosophy and “eastern” philosophy as two things completely foreign to each other, I want to stress the universality of philosophical discourse. In other words, one of my projects – in this paper and in others – is to show the continuity or at least commonality of philosophy on our planet. Second, and more specifically, by asking the odd question as to whether or not Epicurus was a Buddhist, I would like to expose any misleading stereotypes of these two philosophies, which might, for instance, see Buddhism as simply an elevated and benevolent philosophy which stands in stark contrast to the apparent hunger of Epicureanism. Thus, by joining Epicurus and the Buddha together, I intend to challenge our philosophical stereotyping so that we can get at the truth of these two philosophies.

Yet as the subtitle of this paper indicates, I am not interested in a general comparison of the philosophies of the Buddha and Epicurus; rather, I want to explore to what extent these two men accepted what I call “negative happiness.” What is negative, and by extension, positive, happiness? I think we can prepare ourselves for this distinction with two analogous distinctions: (1) the distinction between positive and negative freedom, wherein positive freedom sees true freedom as internal control over oneself, while negative freedom sees true freedom as the *lack* of external coercion, and (2) the distinction between charity and unselfishness, wherein charity stresses self-denial, though not as an end in itself, whereas unselfishness emphasizes not primarily doing good things for others but rather *going without them* ourselves.² Thus, in regard to positive and negative happiness, we can say that while positive happiness sees true happiness as a substantial good that makes virtue a constituent of happiness and regards happiness as something more than the avoidance of suffering, negative happiness sees true happiness as simply *the absence of suffering*.

Consequently, in this paper, I want to argue, firstly, that both the Buddha and Epicurus subscribed to negative happiness, and, secondly, as my subtitle also indicates, that negative happiness

as such is a valuable but ultimately incomplete understanding of true happiness.

1. The Negative Happiness of the Buddha

Siddhârta Gotama (563-483 BC), the man who would later be known as “the Buddha” or “the Enlightened One,” was once the prince of a kingdom in northern India (today, Nepal). As the legend goes, there was a prophecy that Siddhârta would become either the spiritual saviour of the world or a “wheel-turning king,” who is a long-living, earthly king who rules in power and righteousness. For whatever reason, Siddhârta’s father, the ruling king at the time, wanted Siddhârta to become a wheel-turning king and so he sought to keep his son focused on the pleasures associated with kingship and earthly power. However, the king’s effort was of no avail, for Siddhârta received Four Signs, which opened his eyes to the fact of old age, sickness, death and, most importantly, to the possibility of escaping from these three, all of which, for him, ultimately came to represent *dukkha* or suffering. And so seeing that suffering threatened to extinguish all earthly pleasures, the Buddha left behind his family and kingdom to seek the means to escape from suffering.

For the next six years, Siddhârta studied and trained with many Indian philosophers and yogis, seeking a means to eliminate suffering permanently; however, the best these philosophers and yogis could do was temporarily suspend suffering, not obliterate it all together. Indeed, some of these yogis – the more ascetic of the group – even seemed to increase suffering via self-mortification; such extreme measures, Siddhârta decided, were not the way to end suffering, and so he left his teachers behind; nevertheless, Siddhârta did not leave empty-handed, for, setting aside the very real possibility that Buddhism acquired the idea of a world saviour from Zoroastrianism (which had made inroads into northern India),³ Siddhârta accepted the Hindu doctrines of *karma* (“fruits of action”), *samsâra* (“the wheel of rebirth”) and most importantly, the idea that escape from *samsâra* and suffering is the highest good. Indeed, when Siddhârta ultimately achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha, he spoke of his own enlightenment as simply the inverse of Hindu enlightenment; that is, while the Hindus spoke of enlightenment as the realization and experience of the self as *atman*, which is *Brahman* or the totality of all substantial things, the Buddha spoke of enlightenment first as the realization of *anatman*, which means “no self” or the denial of any substantial reality, and second as the subsequent experience of the extinguishing-of-self or *nirvana* through such knowledge. All of these points became explicit in the Buddha’s first sermon on the Four Noble Truths,⁴ which I believe will clearly show the Buddha to have been a proponent of negative happiness.

The First Noble Truth begins by acknowledging that life is suffering. Combining this most fundamental and primary truth with the fact that the Buddha denied the existence of all substances or things which endure unchanging throughout time – indeed, going so far as to

see everything as a interpenetrating, co-dependent world of flux – it is clear that the Buddha saw life – *any and all life*, even the life in the *arûpa* or the highest, formless realms of existence⁵ – as fundamentally connected with pain, falsehood and chaos (since life follows no absolute or substantial order, not even the apparently unsubstantial law of *karma*). It should be added that while pain is the necessary cause of suffering, pain is not identical with suffering, for while the Buddha felt pain, such as hunger and loneliness, which are indeed evils, he did not suffer since the pains he felt did not disturb his state of mind.

The Second Noble Truth develops the First by insisting that suffering is the result of strong craving or desperate desire. In particular, the Buddha believed that the desire for the substantial – especially the substantial self – is the cause of all suffering since such does not actually exist. In other words, because life is merely change, the desire for the permanence of the substantial, such as a substantial self (or even a substantial moral law), is the first cause of all suffering, even though, he would add, minor desires – desires which do not capture the heart or fog one’s vision of the ultimate truth of reality – are to be tolerated.

The Third Noble Truth goes further than the Second, recognizing the need to eliminate strong desires and attain *nirvana*. Yet since this is easier said than done, people need the Fourth Noble Truth or the Eightfold Path, which are the specific steps needed in order to eliminate suffering, such as the acquisition of wisdom, the implementation of proper or virtuous conduct and the exercise of certain mental disciplines.

Consequently, while I agree with recent authorities that the Buddha should not be seen as a pessimist (since he thinks that suffering can be overcome),⁶ I think it is equally clear that the Buddha subscribed to negative happiness or the belief that happiness is fundamentally the absence of suffering, for not only did the Buddha deny substantial reality, including a substantial self and even a substantial law of *karma*, but he also saw all of existence as inevitably connected with pain and thus constantly-threatening suffering – suffering which simply needs to be removed and not replaced with any substantial good, for *nirvana* is not a place or even, despite what some seem to suggest, a persisting substantial state,⁷ but rather the extinguishing of all desires, which, because this presupposes the realization that there is no substantial self (or even a substantial law of *karma*), ultimately leads to an escape from *samsâra* and, for all intents and purposes, nothingness.

2. The Negative Happiness of Epicurus

Even though Epicurus (341-270 BC) was born on the Greek Island of Samos, he spent most of his life in Athens teaching a community of his followers in a place called “the Garden.” Like most pre-Kantian ethical theories, Epicurus’s ethics and theory of happiness were intimately

connected with metaphysics, or, in Epicurus's case, physics.

That is, following Democritus's atomistic theory, Epicurus declared that all of existence can be understood in terms of atoms and their movement through the void; however, unlike Democritus, Epicurus was not a determinist, insisting that atoms sometimes inexplicably swerve (thus making free will possible – or so he thought). Because Epicurus believed that all of existence is atoms moving through the void, he maintained that man's *psuchê* or soul must also be atomistic and hence incapable of surviving death as an enduring unique substance (in his case, a unique combination of extremely fine atoms). Moreover, Epicurus agreed with the general Greek tradition that the gods are perfectly happy, but for him this meant that they are completely free from any and all disturbances, including man's actions – both moral and immoral. Consequently, based on his physics, Epicurus insisted that there is nothing for man ultimately to fear since neither do the gods want to punish man when he dies nor is it even possible for them to do so: "The most formidable of all evils, death, is nothing to us, since, when we exist, death is not present to us, and when death is present, then we have no existence."⁸ And this belief – that we have nothing ultimately to fear – is at the heart of Epicurus's ethics, particularly, his belief about the nature of happiness.

Like most of the ancient philosophers, Epicurus was a eudaimonian when it came to ethics, meaning that he believed happiness or flourishing to be the ultimate justification for ethical behaviour. However, unlike Plato, Aristotle or the Stoics, who saw virtuous action as a constituent of the happy life (i.e. virtue is to be desired for its own sake even though it is also a necessary part of happiness), Epicurus believed that virtuous action is merely a means to the end of happy living, where happy living is equivalent to *pleasant* living. Although this clearly makes Epicurus a hedonist, he should not be thought of as a crude subjective hedonist, who seeks out any and all pleasant kinetic experiences; rather, he should be called a *negative hedonist*, for he defined the deepest pleasures as *katastematic* or static pleasures – to wit, "freedom of the body from pain (*aponia*) and of the soul from suffering (*ataraxia*)."⁹

Thus, despite insisting that all pleasures are intrinsically good (and that there is no absolute morality), Epicurus maintained that by gorging oneself on kinetic pleasures, such as drink, one might actually be increasing one's overall pain and suffering in that such pleasures may bring with them more pain and suffering than pleasure; for instance, in the case of drink, by over-drinking one may become physically ill or be constantly worried about saying something stupid. Indeed, despite some mild protesting,¹⁰ Epicurus might have agreed that it would be equally as well, so long as it were possible, not to feel the need for drink at all since desire itself entails lack and pain. Consequently, I think it is apparent that Epicurus was a proponent of negative happiness since not only did he deny the intrinsic value of virtue but also understood happiness to be pleasure, which is the lack of pain and suffering.

3. The Incompleteness of Negative Happiness

So far I have argued that both the Buddha and Epicurus agree not only that happiness is essentially the absence of suffering but also that suffering is either absolutely (the Buddha) or intimately (Epicurus) connected with strong desire. Moreover, since the avoidance of suffering is the greatest principle for these two philosophers, both may rightly be labelled egotistical, for Epicurus explicitly declared virtue instrumental to his own pleasure and the Buddha, though he spoke of the supreme law of *karma* that interconnects all things, denied any substantial reality, which essentially amounts to a denial of the law of *karma* and hence a denial of the importance of virtue. Thus, while both philosophers emphasized an important truth – that suffering is a great evil – neither provide a completely satisfactory account of happiness, for I believe that true happiness must be a form of positive happiness, which insists upon not only the intrinsic goodness of pleasure (in this respect I agree with C. S. Lewis that “God is a hedonist at heart”¹¹) but also *at least* two other factors.

First, true happiness is found in substantial, enduring things and can only be attained by a substantial, enduring self. Needless to say, this entails the belief that existence is a perfection – i.e. that it is better for something to exist than not to exist. Thus, the Buddha’s denial of substantial reality prevents Buddhism from being a serious contender in the quest for true happiness. And while Epicurus agreed that there is a substantial reality, for him such a reality is a myriad of atoms which swerve, collide and break apart, and ultimately point to nothing that can be identified with a unique, enduring self, whose existence is not meaningful in any deep sense: in other words, you are not you after you die and you may not even be you in this life if you are merely a collection of atoms, whose cohesion does not seem guaranteed by anything. Consequently, I think true happiness requires, among other things, something like a Platonic-Christian conception of the self.

Second, happiness requires virtue to be valuable for its own sake. Since the metaphysics of Buddhism must logically end in the denial of the absoluteness of *karma*, Buddhism, as I have argued, is fundamentally egotistical: while Buddhism prides itself on the interconnectedness of all things and espouses, especially in its Mahayana form, the doctrine of Bodhisattva saviours, who delay their own enlightenment for the sake of helping others, Buddhism cannot consistently maintain its emphasis on virtue while at the same time denying substantial reality, which entails the denial of the substantiality of the law of *karma*; in the end, if Buddhism is followed to its logical conclusion, it must admit egotism or else it must deny logic; yet if it does the latter, as in fact it often does, then all of its teachings literally become nonsensical, including its teachings about *karma* and the interconnectedness of all things. Epicureanism, of course, fares no better than Buddhism, for even though Epicurus made some half-hearted attempts to reconcile virtue with his hedonism, he was forced to admit that virtue is merely a means to the end of happiness. Because it seems fundamentally intolerable to treat people as a means to one’s own happiness, I believe true happiness

requires virtue to be valued for its own sake.

While I could go on and list other elements of true – positive – happiness, I believe my case has been made insofar as I wanted to show first that the Buddha and Epicurus subscribed to negative happiness and second why such a view is unacceptable. Moreover, I hope that throughout, I have encouraged others to look for similarities between eastern and western philosophies so that we can avoid stereotypes and foster a more global understanding of philosophy.

Notes

¹ Adam Barkman is assistant professor of philosophy at Yonsei University in South Korea. He is the author of *C. S. Lewis and Philosophy as a Way of Life*, and is currently co-editing two volumes in Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy series: *Anime and Philosophy* and *Manga and Philosophy*. In addition, he has published over fifteen articles, and has presenting numerous papers at philosophical and theological societies.

² C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley, 96-106 (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 96.

³ Almost certainly the Mahayana Buddhist belief in Maitreya or the future Buddha was influenced by the Zoroastrian teaching about the world saviour, Saoshyant. Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2007), 84.

⁴ *The Dhammapada* 14.190-1.

⁵ Most Buddhists believe that there are thirty-one levels of existence, divided into five basic realms: (1) the *arūpa* or formless realms, where a being is reborn without any body, (2) the *rūpa* or Brahma heavens, where a being is reborn with a body yet he is stretched out over a vast space, (3) the *deva* realms or the realms of the polytheistic gods, (4) the human realm, and (5) the *dugatiyo* realm or realm of bad destinies, such as the realm of animals, evil gods, hungry ghosts and hells. Sarah Shaw, "Appendix B," in *The Jātakas*, trans. Sarah Shaw, 323-5 (New York: Penguin, 2006), 323-5.

⁶ John Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007), 52.

⁷ Joel Kupperman, *Classic Asian Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40.

⁸ Epicurus *Letter to Menaecus* in *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius 10.27.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "He who advises the young man to live well, the old man to die well, is foolish, not only because life is desirable, but also because the art of living well and the art of dying well are one. Yet much worse is he who says that it is well not to have been born, but once born, be swift to pass through Hades' gate. If a man says this and really believes it, why does he not depart from life? Certainly the means are at hand for doing so if this really be his firm conviction." *Ibid.*

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, in *C. S. Lewis: Selected Books*, 729-824 (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 794.

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