

**THE INFLUENCE OF EPICURUS' UTILITARIAN
ETHICS ON 21ST CENTURY PARENTING:
THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC PARENTING
AND DISCIPLINE**

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Abstract

This paper argued that there is a very strong influence of the Epicurean utilitarian ethics on the 21st century parenting and discipline; and that it has brought about a decline in work ethics and hard work. The paper analytically explored the possibility of authentic parenting. It emphasized that pain is not avoidable as it is considered a part of our collective human existence and experience that can eventually lead to long term pleasure. This paper adopted the qualitative and expository methods of investigation.

Introduction

Parenting and discipline of children have never become the interest of social and political philosophers and philosophers in general. It is therefore very scarce to get literature in philosophy that deals with parenting. Nonetheless, parenting in the 21st century calls for serious attention in relation to marriage and family life; because, marriage and family have a very strong connection in ethics and right reasoning which comes with pains and not just pleasure. The Catholic Church makes it succinctly clear that the fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation¹. Hence, the “rights and the duty of parents to educate their children are

¹ Cf. Pius XI's Encyclical Letter *Divini Illius Magistri*, 1, P. 59 ff; encyclical letter *Mit Brennender Sorge*, March 1, 1937: A.A.S. 2; Pius XII's allocation to the First National Congress of the Italian Catholic Teachers' Association, Sept. 8, 1946: Discourses and Radio Messages, Vol. 8, P218

primordial and inalienable”². The Holy Scriptures attest to the necessity of parenting when it admonishes thus: “children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right, that is may go well with you, and that you may enjoy long life on earth. Parents, do not provoke your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1).

Moral Education is inextricably linked to ethics which is “the standards of right and wrong, good and bad, in respect of character and conduct, which ought to be accepted by a class of individuals”. Utilitarianism is “a moral theory according to which an action is right if and only if it conforms to the principle of utility”³. It is a “theory of morality that advocates actions that foster happiness or pleasure and oppose actions that cause unhappiness or harm. When directed towards making social, economic, or political decisions, a utilitarian philosophy would aim for betterment of society as a whole. It holds that an action is right if it results in the happiness of the greatest number of people in a society or a group”⁴. It seeks “to replace reliance on God, tradition, common sense or intuitions with reasoning about facts and their consequences”⁵.

It is against this background that the paper considers the utilitarian ethics of Epicurus inappropriate in raising up children. The paper argues strongly the utilitarian ethics has practically influenced parenting in the 21st century. This is to the extent that a child sees pleasure as the measure of everything. Pleasure becomes the standard for determining what is good as most parents no longer consider that a child should experience pain before he begins to enjoy the good things of life. The paper posit that parenting in the 21st century Nigeria is challenging; and until we avoid the perceived notion that pain be avoided and pleasure sought after it shall become a menace to the Nigerian society.

Epicurus' Utilitarian Ethics

Epicurus believed that “it was simply a psychological fact that the pursuit of pleasure motivates all human actions. This claim is called psychological hedonism. As he puts it, pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly. Every action you perform can be explained in terms of the pursuit of either physical or psychological pleasure”⁶. Hedonism is “the thesis that pleasure is the highest good; that only pleasure has value in it and that all pleasure has value in itself”⁷. Epicurus was a

² Ibid

³ Mautner, T., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 201.

⁴ Mautner, T., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 636.

⁵ Carla Tardi, Utilitarianism. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/u/utilitarianism.asp>, 23-03-22.

⁶ Furrow, D., *Ethics: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, 45.

⁷ Lawhead, W.F., *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 97.

“hedonist: in his view, only pleasure is good in itself. The goal of all action was pleasure, which was held to be naturally and visibly pursued by all creatures. Pleasure, in this theory, was virtually equivalent to the absence of pain, since there are no natural states between the two.”⁸ Epicurus agrees with Aristotle that happiness is the highest good. For him, happiness cannot be identified with pleasure. Epicurus gives two reasons for this. The “main reason is that pleasure is the only thing that people do, as a matter of fact, with value for its own sake. Everything we do, claims Epicurus, we do for the sake ultimately of gaining pleasure for ourselves. We intrinsically pursue pleasure and shun pain. All activity, even apparently self-sacrificing activity or activity done solely for the sake of virtue or what is noble, is in fact directed toward obtaining pleasure for oneself. The second proof is that one immediately perceives that pleasure is good and that pain is bad. No further argument is needed to show the goodness of pleasure or badness of pain”⁹. Although all pleasures are good and all pains evil, Epicurus says that “not all pleasures are choice worthy or all pains to be avoided”¹⁰. Instead, a person should calculate what is in one's long-term self-interest, and forgo what will bring pleasure in the short-term if doing so will ultimately lead to greater pleasure in the long-term future.

Pleasure

Epicurus sharply distinguished two types of pleasure: “1) the underlying harmonious state of body or of mind, catastematic pleasures; and 2) alterations of state, activities, etc. of body or of mind, kinetic pleasures. The former type was to be preferred, and indeed provided the only reliable basis for the expectation of the latter. Once the underlying state had been perfected and all pain removed, then there was no possibility of increasing pleasure, only of varying it by different activities. Some kinetic pleasures were to be rejected if they were a threat to one's underlying well-being”¹¹. For Epicurus, pleasure is after satisfying one's desires. He distinguishes between two different types of pleasure; “moving pleasure and static pleasure. Moving pleasure occur when one is in the process of satisfying a desire, take for instance, eating of food when one is hungry”¹². Static pleasure occur after one's desire have been satisfied, take for instance; when one is full after eating food, he is no longer in need. For Epicurus, static pleasure is the best pleasure. Pleasure is “the principle and the end of a happy life”¹³. Epicurus denies that there is any intermediate state between pleasure and pain. Epicurus advocates that our end in life should be intellectual pleasure, tranquility of soul over the bodily pleasure, which is qualitatively different. Epicurus thus seems to be the first moral philosopher in the history of philosophy to speak of quality of pleasure.

⁸ Mautner, T., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 191.

⁹ Kanu, A.I., *Greek and Utilitarianism Ethics: Lecture notes*, Veritas University, 9.

¹⁰ Epicurus. *internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur>. 23-03-22.

¹¹ Mautner, T., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 191.

¹² William Morison, *The Garden of Epicurus*. <https://iep.utm.edu/garden>. 24-03-22.

¹³ Composta, D., *History of Ancient Philosophy*, 315.

The greatest destroyer of happiness, thinks Epicurus, is anxiety about the future. “The biggest threat to one's underlying mental well-being was fear, above all fear of the gods and fear of death”¹⁴. “If one can banish fear about the future, and face the future with confidence that one's desires will be satisfied, then one will attain tranquility, the most exalted state”¹⁵. Epicurus holds that a particular pleasure is characterized by the feeling it involves. If we want to access among pleasure, we look into their relative consequences produced. But he does believe that we all are equally able to estimate pleasures. The estimation of pleasures is “possible only for the wise man through his rational insight. Anyhow, according to Epicurus, the right understanding of this classification helps us in choosing anything for the health of the body. It can also free the soul from disturbance. He holds that the aim of human life is to avoid pain and fear”¹⁶. According to him, living creatures should not wander for searching something which is missing. The “creature has to search for such things which are good for his body and soul. When we are in need for pleasure and we feel pain, we should look for pleasure. He believed that, after enjoying many pleasures greater discomfort might come as the result of them. Similarly, many pains are better than pleasures, if these can be the cause of greater pleasure”¹⁷. The means of pleasure “are the practice of the four virtues: prudence (*phronesis*)” which is a calculation (*symmetresis*) of pleasures which may be natural, necessary (eating and drinking); natural-non-necessary (crowns on the head, honorifics, perfumes). Temperance and fortitude are instruments of pleasure because they temper the desires and lead to constancy. If they did not bring pleasure, then they would be true evils”¹⁸.

Desires and Pleasure

Because of the close connection of pleasure with desire satisfaction, Epicurus devotes a considerable part of his ethics to analyze different kinds of desires. Epicurus distinguishes between natural and necessary desires, natural but non-necessary desires, and vain and empty desires. Examples of natural and necessary desires include the “desires for food, shelter, and the like. Epicurus thinks that these desires are easy to satisfy, difficult to eliminate, and hard-wired into human beings naturally, and bring great pleasure when satisfied.

Virtues, Justice, Friendship and Pleasure

However, “the virtues for Epicurus are all purely instrumental goods, that is, they are valuable solely for the sake of the happiness that they can bring oneself, not for their own sake. Epicurus says that all of the virtues are ultimately forms of prudence, of calculating what is in one's own best interest”¹⁹.

¹⁴ Mautner, T., *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 192.

¹⁵ Epicurus.internet encyclopedia of philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur>. 24-03-22.

¹⁶ www.ajjernet.com-journals-Vol_5_No_1. 24-03-22.

¹⁷ www.ajjernet.com-journals-Vol_5_No_1. 24-03-22.

¹⁸ Composta, D., *History of Ancient Philosophy*, 320.

¹⁹ Hereford, Z., *Epicurus*. Essential Life Skills.net. <https://www.essentiallifeskills.net/epicurus.html>

Justice is “valued entirely on instrumental grounds, because of its utility for each of the members of society. Epicurus says that the main reason not to be unjust is that one will be punished if one gets caught, and that even if one does not get caught, the fear of being caught will still cause pain. However, he adds that the fear of punishment is needed mainly to keep fools in line, who otherwise would kill, steal, etc”²⁰.

Friendship is “the only social virtue which leads the individual to escape the clamor of the crowds, the passions of politics and tumult of business in order to enjoy a communion of goods with friends”²¹. Epicurus “consistently maintains that friendship is valuable because it is one of the greatest means of attaining pleasure”²². Friends are able to provide one another the greatest security, whereas a life without friends is solitary and beset with perils.

Causes of Indiscipline amongst Children and Youths in the 21st Century

There are so many issues that are causing problems in parenting in the 21st Century; and as such, there is a need to understand that this has serious implications for the integral formation and development of Children. Hence, it is pertinent to outline some of the reasons why there is a decline in moral education and formation in the 21st century parenting:

- 1. Lack of Time:** Time is a critical factor in the raising of children and unfortunately, this is often neglected and considered much irrelevant in 21st century parenting. Parents in the 21st century are busy with so many other and at the end have no time for their children. The 21st century parents entrust the discipline of their children to others especially the housemaids and the school and forget that as parents they are the final authority in the moral formation of their children.
- 2. Over-Pampering:** The Over-pampering of a child is not healthy in disciplining. Some parents feel the child should not be hurt or rebuked for doing what is not right. There is nothing wrong with pampering a child; but, when pampering becomes too much to the extent that the child no longer tolerates being rebuked and corrected, it becomes a very bad signal for the Child's moral formation. Moreover, in over-pampering the child, parents do not allow children experience hardship or hard work; most parents consider hard work as pain or hardship as something to be avoided. As such, children grow up not understanding that hardship and hard work is part of life. This is the cause of several frustrations and suicide.

²⁰ Epicurus. internet encyclopedia of philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur>. 24-03-22.

²¹ Composta, D., *History of Ancient Philosophy*, 320.

²² Epicurus. internet encyclopedia of philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/epicur>. 24-03-22.

3. **Failure to Teach Kids the Fundamental Moral Values:** Parenting in the 21st century have given up on fundamental moral values. These fundamental moral values are very much necessary in parenting and disciplining of the Child. It is the lack of time that makes parents not to have the time to teach their children and thereby entrusting the teaching of fundamental moral values to only the classroom. The classroom is never enough to give that holistic formation for children. Moral values do not necessary generate from the school but begins from what the parents teach the children. The school is only substantiating what has been taught in the home.
4. **Watching of Cartoons without Monitoring:** Cartoons can serve as instructional materials in the development of the Child. Unfortunately, studies have shown that long-term watching of cartoons with negative content (violent, uncivilized behavior etc) can lead to negative viewing experiences for children, such as generating more negative behaviours and emotions, increasing aggressive illusions, and thinking in ways that more easily diverge from the realities of life.
5. **Social Media Influence:** Parental control is very much important when it comes to the relationship of the children to the social media. Social media makes uncensored information accessible to children. This advances the crossing of authority as children encounter different authorities other than their parents online.
6. **Expensive Materials or Gifts:** Buying children gifts and materials are not evil in themselves. Unfortunately, most parents have abused the buying of gifts and materials for their children to the point that when these children grow up they begin to think life should always offer them the best. When the best is not coming forth for them, they begin to resort to other means to acquire wealth; and this destroys the value of contentment on the child.

The Issues and Problems of Parenting in the 21st Century: The Epicurean Influence

There are so many factors that can be listed as being responsible for indiscipline in children. Nonetheless, there are specifics in these causes that are characterized by the Epicurean thought in 21st century parenting. The crux of it is the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure. Parents tend to make their children avoid pain by discouraging them from having experiences that they consider painful or stressful. The pursuit of pleasure is derived from the psychoanalysis that governs children's

behavior during their early years. The pleasure principle is defined in psychoanalytic by Sigmund Freud as seeking pleasure and immediate satisfaction of desires²³; so, the child acts on impulse with the sole objective of obtaining what gives pleasure, and avoid what gives them pain or displeasure. They are incapable of postponing that which gives them gratification and do not tolerate anything that gives them pain; thereby, not contemplating the long-term consequences. The implication is that children who display these tendencies of avoiding pain do not understand or accept limitation. According to Sigmund Freud as reflected in Sibi:

The conscious mind is aware of the present perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings. It exists as the tip of the iceberg. Under this conscious mind, a preconscious mind carries the available memory. From this preconscious mind, a person can retrieve memories into the conscious mind. There is no dispute about the two layers of the mind. Freud's perception suggested that these two layers are only the smallest parts of the mind. The larger part is the unconscious of the mind. All the things, which are not easily available at a conscious level, such as our drives or instinct, memories, and emotions associated with trauma. Like and iceberg, the unconscious mind plays an important role of the personality. It plays as the repository of primitive wishes and impulses. These are mediated by the preconscious mind. Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the importance of the unconscious mind and it governs the behaviour to the greatest degree in persons²⁴.

Although, Epicurean philosophy is congruent with fundamental premises in psychoanalysis, it contributes qualitatively and quantitatively to the theory of pleasure²⁵. The emphasis on pleasure to the detriment of pain calls for serious attention. How is pain perceived? Is pain to be considered negatively or positively since it cannot be avoided in life's experience? How should parents understand the positive impact of pain so as to make it a part of the Child's development? Is pleasure the only gateway to success? What constitutes authentic parenting in marriage and family life? How can children learn beyond pain and see the other side of life? These and more questions call for serious interrogation and further research to help improve parenting in the 21st century.

The Epicurean Utilitarian ethics has greatly influenced parenting and can lead to the breakdown of the society. A society infiltrated by drug addiction, rape, scam, dishonesty, and negative vice flows from the influence of the utilitarian ethics. The

²³ Sibi J.K Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalytic Theory In an International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal, Special Issue 75, May 2020 www.langit.org Retrieved Online 9th June, 2022

²⁴ Sibi J.K Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalytic Theory In an International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal, Special Issue 75, May 2020 www.langit.org Retrieved Online 9th June, 2022

²⁵ Yahalom J Freud and Epicurean Philosophy: Revisiting Drive Theory In a Journal of Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Vol. 50, No.3; A Publication of William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis & Psychology and the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Society, 2014, P.395

family is the bedrock of the society; and, if the family does not embrace pain as a fundamental aspect of a child's development, then, such a family is contributing to the breakdown of society. Pleasure is not always a value; there are pleasures that destroy.

Conclusion

Epicurus' ethics is a form of egoistic hedonism. He holds that the only thing that is intrinsically valuable is one's own pleasure; anything else that has value is merely a means to securing pleasure for oneself. He recommends a virtuous, moderately ascetic life as the best means to securing pleasure. Parents should learn how to balance what constitutes pleasure and what constitutes pain in parenting. The exposition of Epicurus' utilitarian ethics should guide us not to always seek pleasure and avoid pain; but, that parenting should keep abreast with ethical standards in parenting irrespective of pain or pleasure.

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