

Connecticut College

Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

Student Research and Publications

2022

A Reminiscence of 21 Months in an Epicurean Camp

Junhyung Han

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/srp>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research and Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.
The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

GADFLY



Jul 29

A REMINISCENCE OF 21 MONTHS IN AN EPICUREAN CAMP

Junhyung Han



CREATIVE COMMONS

I spent my first semester in college worrying about the 21-month-long military service that would befall me in about half a year. My antipathy toward conscription had been consistent since 2015, when I wrote an op-ed piece, “Proper Welfare for ROK Soldiers,” in *The Korea Times* as an 11th-grader. Back then, I expressed my reluctance to be conscripted as follows:

As a [17]-year-old Korean man, I must serve my country in a few years. Yet I am not eager to leave my university work for [21] months. This dissatisfaction is not a matter of weak patriotism. Who could be content to do dangerous and inefficient work with shamelessly low compensation, in a place where their freedom of expression is restricted?

Five years later, I cringe at the thought of my naïveté being paraded in one of the biggest English-language newspapers in Korea. Without knowledge of the financial status of my country, my remarks sounded like the musings of an entitled idealist. However, my piece attested to an aversion that many Korean male adolescents and young adults share. Spending two years of their lives for seemingly nothing cannot be pleasant for any ambitious youth.

I resented the fact that I would forget much of what I learned before going to the military and would fall behind my peers by remaining a college student while they became professionals or graduate students. But now, I am glad that military service was a part of my life. My old comrades refreshed me a few weeks ago by video-calling me as they gathered to talk over a drink, just to ask if I was doing well in the U.S. Despite the lack of similarity in our lives, we still keep in touch and reminisce about the same banal episodes from our service that we have now talked about dozens of times. Many people who complete their service—even those whose services were longer and harsher than mine—speak positively about it, recalling the good old days.¹ I recently watched a reality TV show where a Korean celebrity who served about a year and a half ago went on an excursion with his previous comrades—to them, he was not a top K-pop star but just an ordinary man. Considering the aversion they had probably felt before their military service, it seemed ironic to me that they had positive recollections of their time serving.

I will try to explain this phenomenon by suggesting two possible explanations. The first explanation will analyze the phenomenon based on my experiences and anecdotes. However, given that the first explanation is not universal enough to apply to everyone who participated in military service, I will present a second explanation, which philosophically accounts for the phenomenon by drawing a parallel between military service and the effect of living up to Epicurean principles.

Not surprisingly, conscripted soldiers are not given much freedom of choice. One of the few decisions they can make is what to do during their allotted three-hour free time each day within the military base. There is no freedom of when to get up and go to bed, what to eat and wear, what to do on a certain day, with whom to be in the same squad, and when to go on a vacation. The necessities are all provided, while what is unnecessary for survival is not allowed. For instance, soldiers are nourished with food that will keep their bodies sturdy, but even those from the wealthiest backgrounds are not allowed to order a high-end sushi plate or consume alcoholic beverages; they are clothed in uniforms and mediocre sweatshirts, prohibited from wearing a Louis Vuitton cardigan or a Rolex watch. During the approximately two years of service, those from impoverished backgrounds do not need to worry about starving and being unable to pay rent. On the other hand, elites, who might have been pressured to live hard to retain their prestige, can take an unprecedented break from their work. Therefore, military service may allow people to temporarily lay down such lifelong burdens—regardless of background.

Some might argue that soldiers cannot be happy when they are so constrained and subjected to forced modesty. But I wonder whether the soldiers would truly consider themselves helpless prisoners during the service. In my experience, none of my comrades identified themselves as helpless prisoners; rather, service sharpened their sense of what they wanted to do after being discharged and what they needed to do in order to achieve their goals. For instance, a lot of my comrades honed their skills in welding, operating forklifts, and repairing motor vehicles to acquire national certificates that would prove their dexterity. Those who were not engineers studied English, accounting, and mathematics by signing up for online courses to prepare for their return to their colleges or workplaces. Such endeavors were often the result of their contemplation and reappraisal of what they have done prior to their service—those who had found the program of their college unsatisfactory, for example, planned for a transfer. One of my comrades who had retained mobile phones with his family prior to his conscription, after a few months of deliberation, started saving money during his service and ended up opening his own restaurant. All these examples seem to debunk the claim that constraint and forced modesty demoralize conscripted soldiers.

This is why I could consider the service to be postponing—instead of hindering—my goals. I had to resume my education and strive for good grades to be accepted to prestigious graduate programs when my service ended. But until then, I could take a much-needed rest. At the time of enlistment, I was completely enervated by the intense past four years, which were spent struggling not to fall behind my classmates at a top-notch high school and gnashing my teeth to prove that I would excel at my work despite my relatively humble background. I needed to flee to somewhere where I would not be expected to be an elite, and for me, the military was that place.

In contrast to my case, however, not everyone who enlisted needed a break from an arduous life—some were well-off and relishing a restful life prior to their conscription. For instance, some of my well-off comrades had never been ambitious about anything but playing online games. Most memorably, an affluent comrade whose father was a gangster had such little fear of authority that he would constantly disobey his superior and behave immorally. Considering such cases, my first explanation that service allows people to temporarily lay down their lifelong burdens does not seem to entirely explain the positive memories of (or even nostalgia for) service shared by such a large multitude of Korean men.

Thus, I would like to propose a more widely applicable theory, by comparing this forced modesty to Epicureanism, a school of thought that ultimately advocates for the pursuit of *ataraxia* (peace of mind) by means of removing unnecessary fears and desires. In “The Symphony of a Lifetime,” Joseph Epstein, a writer and former editor of *The American Scholar*, briefly summarizes Epicurean doctrines under the name of “Epicurus’ Four-Step Program.” The program states, first of all, that we ought not to believe in (or at least not fear) the gods, who are, according to Epicurus, indifferent to us. Second, it tells us not to worry about death, for death involves termination of sensation and perception and thus we will not feel pain. Third, the program suggests that we forget about pain as best as we can and zero in on the good things in life. And finally, it advises us not to waste our time and energy attempting to acquire luxuries, as ambition and avarice necessarily lead to pain. The last pieces of advice accentuating the importance of a simple, self-sufficient life in “the

garden” surrounded by wise and prudent friends seem to represent the forced modesty in which conscripted soldiers live. In saying this, I do not mean that the military and Epicureanism share the motivation of *ataraxia*; instead, I intend to zero in on the humble, unambitious life they both require regardless of their motivation. I argue that although military service is not meant to philosophically enlighten the conscripted, its side effects can be similar to the benefits of Epicureanism due to the shared imperative of living a modest life.

After introducing the “Four-Step Program,” Epstein expresses his skepticism toward the idea that one can enjoy an enriched life by way of Epicurean asceticism. As Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher and professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, elucidates in “Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire,” in *Epicureanism*, the pursuit of vain desires (such as wealth, power, and sex) is discouraged, while natural desires (such as moderate amounts of food, a mediocre shelter, and a few wise friends) are to be sought in order for one to lead a simple, painless life. Since an enriched life often requires us to step out of our comfort zone and put up with the psychological burden that ensues, Epstein’s skepticism seems reasonable. Andrew Solomon, a clinical psychologist and LGBTQ+ rights activist who went through numerous ordeals owing to his identity, would likely agree with Epstein. In his TED talk, “How the worst moments in our lives make us who we are,” he underscores that we ought to “forge meaning and build identity” from our various life experiences, even the unpleasant ones. But to do so, we need to give up the pursuit of *ataraxia*. Although he did not refer to Epicureanism in his TED talk, we can assume that Solomon would not suggest that we live by Epicureanism, for he would argue that the simple Epicurean life in “the garden” lacks the resources for forging meaning and building identity. I agree with both of them: excessive avoidance of stepping out of our comfort zone will surely make our lives monotonous and leave little room for establishing identity.

However, we need to keep in mind that identities are not only self-defining but also burdensome. Although we primarily use identity to describe ourselves, the notion of identity has a normative component as well. In other words, identifying ourselves as X does not merely mean that we are X; rather, it often implies that we behave in ways society thinks X *ought* to. For instance, if one identifies oneself as a mother, it not only means that one gave birth to one’s children but also that one is expected to raise those children in accordance with society’s norms. Thus, the more identities we have, the more sets of social norms we need to abide by. Then it is not hard to imagine how burdensome it might be if one identifies, for example, as a daughter, a spouse, a philosophy professor, an adviser of several students, a department chair, and an amateur CrossFit athlete.

In that regard, I think temporary military service can alleviate the burden that comes from the multifariousness of our identities. The military promotes uniformity for the sake of efficient government of forces. While civilian society progresses by expecting people to assume multiple roles, the military demands simplicity. No matter what I had been in civilian society, the military hardly cared—instead, I was one of many soldiers of the maintenance battalion, the first infantry division, and the Republic of Korea Army. Wearing the same uniform and doing the same job, I was no longer Junhyung Han but just another soldier.

Regardless of the difference in purpose, military service and Epicureanism bring about similar outcomes: effacement of multifariousness and simplification of one's life. Because my service would terminate on a designated date in the future, I could relish the *Epicureanism camp* by, for the first time ever, not being expected to outrun others and become unique. Almost everyone in my battalion knew I had been studying in the U.S., which is seen as prestigious in Korean society. But because I was an anomaly—as many of my comrades had chosen not to go to college but instead to learn how to repair devices—all they demanded of me was that I answer their airy questions about whether I understand lectures delivered in English or what it is like to study abroad.

Therefore, what I liked the most about my comrades is that they liked me unconditionally, owing to the effacement of the identities I constructed in civilian society. Likewise, I liked my former comrades (and current friends) not because I wanted them to repair my personal belongings but rather because they were there with me—and it was a great relief that they were.

Some readers may question whether this theory can account for the aforementioned cases of those who have lived well-off, easygoing lives. But I think leading such lives does not necessarily imply that they have fewer identities than those who live more strenuously. Let us assume that, for instance, Luke is a well-off amateur gamer and Youtuber while Cal is a poor graduate student who is spending her life only writing a doctoral dissertation. Although Cal lives a more arduous life, Luke may have more identities—for example, being a member of a gaming club, the owner of his Youtube channel, an esteemed star of his fans and subscribers, and so forth—and thus undertakes more duties that arise from the social interactions that his identities involve. Since 1) the strenuousness of our lives has little to do with the number of identities and 2) we, in most (if not all) cases, have at least a few identities that necessarily arise in the course of social interactions, I think my second theory can explain why so many people perceive their military service as a somewhat liberating experience regardless of what or how they were before enlistment.

Some readers may also question the parallel between military service and Epicureanism, for military service is often associated with Stoicism, which, according to Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, claims that “[v]irtue consist in a *will* that is in agreement with Nature.” Stoics argue that it is worthless to bewail inevitable aspects of life and that we thus need to amend our will to suit the world. For instance, to a girl who just lost her parents in a horrendous car accident, Stoics might simply advise her not to bemoan their death by acknowledging that they could not but die that way. Such an attitude—which Nancy Sherman refers to as a “suck it up” mentality in “A Crack in the Stoic's Armor”—is often thought to be necessary for soldiers, who have to complete their duty despite the loss of their comrades during military actions, and that seems to be why military service is often associated with Stoicism.

However, I believe that military service should not be associated with Stoicism because I think “sucking it up” and attaining *apatheia* (a state of mind wherein one is not disturbed by passions) are, in fact, subtly different. “Sucking it up” focuses merely on getting over negative emotions. When we are asked to “suck it up,” we are expected to overcome the past and orient ourselves toward the future so that we are unimpeded in getting our job done. Stoic *apatheia*, however, zeroes in on attaining and maintaining a state of serenity

preceded by the realization that it is of no use to strain for what is beyond our control—*apatheia* is rather a transcendent state wherein we minimize our vulnerability. But the military does not demand soldiers to reach that state; what it wants is for them to be able to carry on their operations regardless of their psychological state. (And it is also worth mentioning that neither “sucking it up” nor *apatheia* seems to be relevant to my goal of figuring out why Korean men have overall positive recollections of military service.) Thus, I think Epicureanism characterizes the lives of conscripted Korean soldiers more accurately.

Despite some minor setbacks, military service was meaningful to me. As a person driven by ambition and tempted by avarice, I wonder whether I will ever give myself another year or two down the road to lay things down and efface my identities. It may be impossible to live up to societal values while taking an Epicurean retreat from my current life. But I hope that I will be able to incorporate the unconditional love I felt for my comrades into my own life in what some call “the real world.” And I suspect that my theory about military service explains why so many look back and feel that this was not wasted time after all.

¹ There are, nonetheless, some unfortunate ones who experienced trauma and harassment inflicted by malicious superiors/comrades, and I acknowledge and lament the fact that such harassment is an intractable and long standing problem of the military.

Writing (