

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 6:15 AM

First of all, I do certainly agree that pleasures being continuous is an important aspect. We want pleasure to be as as maximized as possible throughout our lives, and we can attain that through the mind's understanding that pain is short if intense and manageable if long, and offset pain with recollection of good memories and in many other ways. The ideal, of course, would be to include no prospect of interruption by death, but that's only possible as far as we know to the gods (though we get very close through the understanding that unlimited time provides no "greater" pleasure than limited time). I would say "very close" rather than "the same" because the pleasure of a god differs in "time" from our own pleasure.

So continuity is a very important aspect of the goal, but what I am saying is that continuity / persistence alone cannot necessarily trump intensity / quality of pleasure. The "most pleasant" isn't measured only in how long it lasts, but in how much depth of pleasure experience. The pleasure I get from breathing is not a pleasure i would choose over the pleasure of saving my wife or child from a fire. If I remember to come back here I will add in that quote from Usener about "this is the meaning of the greatest good, if we think about it rather than go walking around endlessly debating it."

But the real point I want to add to this thread now is that there was a need for Epicurus to focus on continuity of pleasure for another reason: one again, to be able to prevail over Plato's arguments that pleasure cannot be the greatest good. Here again I am following DeWitt's analysis which i think is sound (this section continues further, but this first part is the heart of it):

THE NATURAL CEILINGS OF PLEASURE

Having established body and soul upon a parity, equal partners in life, Epicurus next proceeded to propound a number of paradoxes: first, that limits of pleasure were set by Nature, beyond which no increase was possible; second, that pleasure was one and not many; and third, that **continuous** pleasure was possible. These new doctrines were the offspring of controversy, because the contrary doctrines had been sponsored by Plato and his followers, who in this instance agreed for the most part with the multitude.

The first paradox is part of Authorized Doctrine 3, and by this position its prime importance is revealed: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures." The meaning is plain if the pleasure of eating be taken as an example. Nature is the teacher, as usual, and sets the norm. Hunger is a desire of the first category according to Epicurus: it is both natural and necessary. Where this natural and necessary desire for food exists, the pleasure of satisfying it cannot

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PLEASURE CAN BE CONTINUOUS

The apex of the new structure of ethics erected by Epicurus consists in the teaching that pleasure can be continuous. The discovery of a logical basis for this proposition was essential for the promulgation of hedonism as a practical code of conduct for mankind. No philosophy that offered mainly intermittent intervals of pleasure would have possessed any broad or urgent appeal for those in quest of the happy life.

The predecessors of Epicurus had spent considerable thought upon the analysis of pleasure, but their attitude was in the main merely analytical and academic, lacking relevance to action. Their real was not for promoting the happiness of mankind. They were rather in the position of men who give themselves to the study of anatomy without contemplating the practice of medicine. The attitude of Epicurus, on the contrary, was pragmatic from the beginning. The declaration that "Vain is the word of that philosopher by which no melody of mankind is healed" has already been quoted.¹¹

The desired logical basis for the continuity of pleasure was afforded by the discovery of natural settings of pleasure. From this is derived the distinction into basic and ornamental or superfluous pleasure, corresponding respectively to natural and necessary desires and those that are neither natural nor necessary. Hunger and thirst exemplify the

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lower class while the desire for rich viands and rare wines belongs to the second class. Correspondingly, the satisfaction of normal hunger and thirst is a basic pleasure while the gratification of abnormal desires for rich foods and drinks is ornamental and superfluous.

This recognition of basic pleasure, in its turn, signified the recogni-

tion of a normal state of being, consisting of health of mind and of body and freedom from fears and all unnecessary desires, which was called *ataraxia* or *aponia*. This condition was demonstrated *arête*, but allowance must be made for a certain variation. Hunger and thirst cease and call for satisfaction, which is a moderately kinetic pleasure, whereupon the individual returns to the normal state of absence of pain. Epicurus describes it in one of those reciprocal statements for which he had a preference: "Only then have we need of pleasure when from the absence of pleasure we feel pain, and when we do not feel pain we no longer feel need of pleasure."¹² While these words have reference to the natural desires of the body, the description of the normal state must be understood to include freedom from pain in the body and distress in the mind.

The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a good *casus in rem arguente*,¹³ but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or *ataraxic* state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.

Even so the present-day same objection is raised. For instance, a modern Platonist, ill informed on the true tenets of Epicurus, has this to say: "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by regarding pleasure as the only positive concern?"¹⁴ This ignores the fact that this was but one of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he represented kinetic as well as *ataraxic* pleasures. It ignores also the fact

that Epicurus took personal pleasure in public festivals and entertainments

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his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect. Neither does it take account of the fact that in the judgments of Epicurus those who feel the least need of luxury enjoy it most and that intervals of abstinence enhance the enjoyment of luxury.¹⁵ Thus the Platonist ignores pain upon himself the necessity of denying that the moderation of the rest of the year furnishes additional zest to the enjoyment of the Christmas dinner; he has failed to become aware of the Epicurean adage "condensing pleasure."

On a level with this criticism is the allegation of a more recent writer that Epicurus put himself in a corner by defining pleasure as freedom from pain.¹⁶ It was not Epicurus who put himself in a corner but rather Aristippus and Ptolemy, who by recognizing only pains of pleasure appeared by intervals either void of pleasure or neutral or mixed, rendered all continuity of pleasure impossible and consequently all continuity of happiness. The error of the modern critic is to allow ancient conservatism to vitiate the independence of modern judgment. The ancient enemies of Epicureanism were not concerned to present a real estimate of its teachings; they pounced upon those doctrines which, when considered singly, seemed susceptible of refutation or ridicule. They kept harping upon the negative description of pleasure as freedom from pain and ignored the positive aspects of health of mind and health of body. The latter, being difficult to attack, is lacking from the hostile criticisms and survives only anonymously in the literary tradition.

It would have been strange if this doctrine of continuous happiness were absent from the Aristotelian Doctrines. Its presence is easily over-

looked, because the content of the controversy has become blurred with the lapse of time, but the emphasis derived from premisses of positive want have been at one time striking. It forms part of the famous *arête* phraseology, Dialectic 5. The first part, already quoted, identifies the basic pleasure as freedom from pain, the only kind that could be continuous: "The removal of all pain is the limit of magnitude for pleasures." This rules out the "normal state" as postulated by Plato; it identifies the normal state as one of *ataraxic* pleasure. The second part of the Doctrine disposes of Plato's "mixed state": "And wherever the experience of pleasure is present, so long as it prevails, there is no pain or distress or a combination of them." This amounts to denying that pain and pleasure are capable of existing and of resulting in a state that is different from either. Epicurus implies instead and elsewhere

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teaches that pain is subtractable from pleasure, leaving a balance of the latter.¹⁷ This principle applies either to physical pain or mental distress or to both together. It is essential to the thesis that continuous pleasure is possible.

Those who denied that pleasure was the *telos* were naturally not concerned with the question of the continuity of pleasure, but there was an analogous question of equal consequence, whether the wise man could be happy under all circumstances. The importance of this revealed itself shortly after Plato's demise and showed no abatement for three centuries. In two passages Cicero lists the names of those who gave an affirmative answer — from which the name of Plato is conspicuously absent — and elsewhere he pretends to cite the opinion of Epicurus, misrepresenting him shamelessly and using his name as an excuse

for parading a tedious collection of his own translations from Greek tragedy on the topic of pain.⁴⁹ What Epicurus is so scorned as saying is this: "Even if under torture the wise man is happy."⁵⁰ Cicero chose to imagine him in the lower hell of the great *Thais*, in which the victims were raised alive, and so saying "How pleasant; how little this torture means to me!" This is a shabby inversion and shameful quibbling. It ignores the difference between *tares*, "pleasure" and *lebens*, "happy."

Even Epicurus could not have used pleasure as an invariable synonym for happiness. He died a happy man but in physical agony. His last words, known even beyond his own sect, exhibit the triumph of happiness over pain: "On this blessed day of my life, which is likewise my last, I write these words to you all. The pains of my stragglers and disciples do not abuse the egress of their characteristic severity and continue to keep me company, but ever against all these I see the joy in my soul at the recollection of the dignifications composed by you and the rest."⁵¹ He is here exemplifying the subtraction of pain from pleasure, leaving a balance of pleasure, which is happiness. The letter is addressed to *Idem* but is intended for the whole *Lampyrus* circle, which made many contributions to the literature of the school. It is the grateful recognition of this service, together with all that it implies, that in this instance is declared to outweigh the physical pain.

It was the discovery of static pleasure, without which continuity of pleasure was impossible, that resulted in the division of pleasures into

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static and kinetic. There was no call for such a division until the note

But in the end i see no reason for concluding that "length of time over life" necessarily overrides all other considerations in deciding which pleasures to choose, and i see many reasons for taking the opposite position (that we choose what we deem to be the "most pleasant" - not which lasts the longest).