

Episode Ninety-Three: Torquatus Leads Us Forward Into Conflict Over Epicurean Ethics

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2021 at 4:40 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

No, no, no. I thought we had agreed on this one. We choose by applying whether a specific pleasurable activity leads to a more pleasurable life. We don't need to consult a list or ranking or hierarchy. We should not "rank" pleasurable activities in the abstract. There is no absolute hierarchy for all time of pleasures even for the individual.

All we can say is right here, right now, this activity option before me would lead to a more pleasurable life, therefore, at this time, I will choose to engage in this. This activity which I desire to engage in in the future may be pleasurable in that future moment, but will in the end bring more pain into my life. Therefore, I reject it. I reject that anyone can sit down, go through a list of let's say 100 pleasures and rank them and adhere to that list for all time at every moment throughout their life. What is choice-worthy is contextual, dependent on circumstances, and what is choice-worthy now may not be when circumstances are similar in the future.

It is very interesting to me how when we spoke on the podcast we seemed to more easily agree that we were on the same page, but in putting the positions down in writing we seem to find agreement harder.

To me, you could have started out that passage as Yes Yes Yes rather than no no no because I see us in total agreement, especially when we identify that you are saying two different things here: "I reject (1) that anyone can sit down, go through a list of let's say 100 pleasures and rank them **and (2) adhere to that list for all time at every moment throughout their life.**"

As to point 2 you are certainly correct correct - the ranking will change from day to day, hour to hour, decision to decision. But as to point 1 you certainly *can* rank the possible pleasures as you predict them as of any given moment, because that is how you make every decision, looking forward in time to what will happen to you if you make one choice or another.

Don you seem to be requiring that a "ranking" be made against an absolute outside standard. I too reject that, but I consider that my personal ordering of preferences as to which pleasures are greater "to me" to be a proper use of the word "ranking." There is no outside absolute all-time list that can tell us how much pleasure an activity will generate across the board and all the time -- that is why "Utilitarianism" as referenced in a nearby thread must fail. Epicurus was not a Utilitarian and I think would reject that for exactly the reason you are arguing.

Maybe you would prefer to use another word than "ranking" because you think all rankings require an outside standard, but that would again be a definitional choice on which to be clear and it's not my understanding that the word "ranking" and the "process of ranking" must require an absolute standard - it seems to me the word can be used properly referring only to our own individual standard that is in fact contextual, as you say, and changes even within us over time and circumstance.

Maybe I should reiterate on one important point: I completely agree with you Don that there is no absolute unchanging standard by which we can rank pleasures for all people and all time and place - or even with total confidence for we ourselves in the future. From moment to moment we do make that assessment, but that is why we reject "Utilitarianism" because as a political system it is impossible to come up with an absolute standard which applies to everyone at all times and all places.

That's why I totally agree with your comments to Kalosyni above that Epicurus was not a "Utilitarian" politically. That's an extremely important point that we've made here on the forum several times in the past and need to continue making every time that issue comes up. "Was Epicurus an Utilitarian?" is a very legitimate and natural question to ask, but it's very foundational that the answer is "No."

It's kind of like explaining why Epicurus did not see himself as an atheist even though he rejected the existence of supernatural gods. He meant what he said and he said what he meant. He believed in "gods" but he rejected the definition of "gods" asserted by the establishment.

As you (Don) indicated above, the factors that K. listed Bentham as considering are in fact relevant considerations about pleasures to keep in mind in making practical decisions about actions to take. But those considerations do not cross the line into quantifiable absolutes that can (or should) be looked upon as allowing us to say "for all times and all places we will prioritize chocolate ice cream factories over vanilla ice cream factories." To do so would be as perverse as listening to Epicurus talk plainly about [Epicurean gods](#) but still at the same time insisting that he means them to be supernatural. He is making very plain statements about the nature of gods as non-supernatural and pleasure as a feeling which varies by context, and it is essential to absorb those lessons or we've learned nothing.

As a general and final observation for this post, it seems to me that we can with some ease point to certain experiences and with clarity call them "pleasures" or "pains," because in pointing we are pointing at particular people at particular times undergoing particular experiences. But when we sit back and speak or write "pleasure in general" or simply refer to "pleasure in the abstract" (and i do think that is a valid exercise) we are moving from a "pointing" exercise to a "definitional" exercise (inherently a "word game") and we have to be much more careful.