

Collecting Ancient Instances of the Argument: "Pleasure Cannot Be The Highest Good Because It Has No Limit"

Post by "Don" of December 29, 2021 at 11:09 PM

First, Epicurus's "limit" or "boundary stone" of pleasure seems eminently practical to me. If your mental and physical being is completely imbued with pleasure, by definition, you are feeling no pain. If you are feeling as much pleasure as possible with no hint of pain, there's no way that could be increased. You could feel different kinds of pleasure at that point, but you can't feel "more" pleasure if you're experiencing an absolute lack of any pain. This could be complete relaxation and calm or some other kind of all-encompassing pleasurable experience.

Now, that being said, I don't think that's *humanly* possible: to experience that limit of pleasure. Diogenes Laertius provides commentary on this (X.121): "Two sorts of happiness (eudaimonia) can be conceived: (A) the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented; the other (B) admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures." Only the gods can experience happiness that cannot be ἐπίτασιν "augmented" or "increased in intensity or force." The pleasures of the rest of us can be προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν "added/supplemented and taken away/removed." (These two words are the opposite of each other, i.e., plus and minus.) Theoretically, humans could enjoy the happiness/pleasure/good that cannot be increased. Theoretically. But as a practical matter, that's going to be difficult. However, that goal is maybe what is provided by the idea of a god (or maybe the sage, the sophos): "And never, neither awake nor in sleep, throw yourself into confusion, and you will live as a god among humans; because no person who lives among eternal pleasures is like a mortal being." (End of the letter to Menoikeus)

All that being said, I think pleasure is sometimes conflated with desire in those dialogues and these discussions. Full disclosure: I have not read [Philebus](#). On my list, not read yet. From what I have read, it seems this conflation may be part of the problem. A *desire* for wealth or fame can never be satisfied. There's always more money to get. There's always more fame to acquire. Somebody on Earth will have money you don't have and somebody won't know who you are. That's why those *desires* are empty/vain/κενός. Now, the *pleasure* you get from getting a taste of fulfilling those *desires* is real and good. But those *desires* lead to frustration and so they are not to be recommended.

Finally, pleasure is the telos because it is what everything else points to. Why do we act virtuously? Because we feel pleasure when doing it. Some do it because they like to be seen acting virtuously. They take pleasure in being seen acting virtuously. Virtue is a means to an end, the end, which is pleasure. "Why do we feel pleasure?" seems to me to be a nonsensical question. That's how nature evolved us! I know this argument doesn't/didn't convince everyone,

but it seems patently obvious to me. Pleasure is the telos not because it's "perfect." It's the telos because it's what everything else works towards. In the game of life personified as Old MacDonald's Farm, pleasure is the cheese. It stands alone. Okay, not the best metaphor but we'll leave it there.