

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

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2021 at 7:30 AM

I put "thanks" instead of thumbs up on some of these because I glad to see this discussion. Here are some responses:

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

What I cannot quite grasp is why an imperfect being (the human), arising from imperfect beginnings and employing imperfect means, must necessarily have as its aim something perfect.

I have a very important but somewhat tongue-in-cheek answer: "Because you are a MAN!" And you're not just ANY man, you're a Greek, you're a Roman, and you would be ashamed to be satisfied by setting a goal for yourself of ANYTHING BUT THE BEST! How dare you even SUGGEST that we use our lives to pursue anything but the best??

I see this as much the same message as those "Be All You Can Be" advertisements the Marines used to use. And in fact I truly see no problem with that attitude, even - or especially - as an Epicurean. We of all people take the position that we only have one life to live - no second chances, no reincarnation, no heaven after death. So for me, that has always been one of the most compelling observations of the philosophy: when you know your life is short and over for an eternity thereafter, how can you accept wasting a second of that time in failing to identify and pursue whatever is BEST? Now that probably wasn't the attitude of a lot of Epicurus' Athenian contemporaries -- there was probably a lot of simple "human pride" mixed in. But I do think that the "Why not be the best you can be?" attitude is sound reasoning, and in order to answer that question, the inquiring mind has to ask "Well, ok - What is the best I can be?"

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

but at my current level of understanding I slightly wish that he had cut down that argument instead of trying to supply an adequate solution.

I am afraid that the "cutting down" led in fact to part of our problem today. I firmly think that the Letter to Menoeceus, and the PD's, are both truncated and "outline-level" versions of Epicurus' full position. If we had more of the texts I feel certain that what we are discussing now (the view that the absence of pain limit is a response to this logical argument) would have been

made amply clear. In fact I think that in the atmosphere of the philosophic schools of Athens everyone would have been taught that Platonic argument at the beginning stages of their learning about philosophy, and Epicurus and his contemporaries never considered or thought to deal with the possibility that this Platonic logical argument would fail from view, or that any of their future students would (like Don and me too until recently 😊) would fail to have read [Philebus](#) and be aware that it is necessary to deal with it. Surely we aren't the first to ask, and they in fact did ask: "Why did Protarchus and [Philebus](#) agree to back off and abandon their view that Pleasure is the highest good? Could they not have been better arguers? What should they have said?

And I think what we are discussing now is "What [Philebus](#) and Protarchus should have said to shut up Socrates."

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

Now I'm trying to better understand why he chose to take it. Since it recurs in almost all of the core texts, he must have felt that it was important.

Yes, not only important but essential given the knowledge of his students of the Platonic arguments, as discussed above.

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

I suspect that the answer has something to do with his conception of the gods; in paraphrase, 'they do not trouble us because their perfect happiness prevents them from wanting or needing to trouble us'.

See, I would not go in that direction except only to this limited extent: I think that the anticipations of the gods -- our ability to project the nature of their existence and what these "best" beings would be doing with their lives --- I think that aspect of human nature, that inborn faculty to look for "the best" -- is a large part of the driving force that compels us to deal with Socrates' question. It's our anticipations that lead us to recognize that there are such things as "better" and "worse" that we then devote our studies and our conceptual reasoning to in order to figure it out.

if we didn't have something within us that drives us to be "the best" then we might well be content to live in a cave on bread and water and air so long as our experience was filled with bread and water and air. But something drives us to "do better" than that form of existence.

[Quote from Don](#)

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.

Yes - I agree with all of that EXCEPT the implication of the last sentence. When you're at the limit because your experience is completely filled with experiences you find pleasurable, then you're at the limit and there's nothing else you can experience - by definition. I would say tranquility is not BEYOND or IN ADDITION to that limit, but is part of the bundle of pleasures that you are experiencing that have taken you up to that limit -- but beyond that point you cannot conceptually proceed.

[Quote from Scott](#)

- if a favorite song comes on, or one's best friend whom was away for several months surprises and walks in, or any myriad of other pleasant things would suddenly occur, one's pleasure would increase, no? If those things happened to me, I feel certain I would experience an increase of pleasure. What am I missing here?

I think you're still not grasping the full significance of what Socrates is arguing. He is saying:

A life that's full of pleasure, but which can be made better by more pleasant things, is obviously not the best life you can conceptually achieve. The best life you can conceptually achieve cannot be improved. Socrates is accepting your premise, Scott, and using it to argue against you. Because Socrates is saying (in the full argument in [Philebus](#)) and elsewhere, that if more pleasure can always be added to your life, then you must recognize that "more pleasure" cannot logically be set as your goal -- you will always want more. And if you will always want more, Socrates will tell you, then you need to ask yourself "how do i know what else, what more kinds of pleasure, that I need?"

And Socrates will tell you "That Scott, is the function of WISDOM, and PRUDENCE and KNOWLEDGE." And if you admit that, as did [Philebus](#)/Protarchus, then you are quickly impelled to the conclusion that it is not correct to set PLEASURE as your goal -- No, the correct goal is in fact WISDOM/PRUDENCE/KNOWLEDGE!!!

And thus, Scott, Socrates would say to you, you must now join our fellow Platonists and Stoics on the road to search for WiSDOM (and the other virtues) which you have admitted to be more important than pleasure!