

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Pivot" of January 9, 2019 at 11:49 AM

Cassius - good to speak with you again. The new forum updates look great.

What I'm trying to argue is that no matter how sophisticated the Epicurean in calculating his means to happiness, he will be barred from achieving it. Your first point (1) is the distinction I was drawing between the foolish Epicurean who pursues short-term pleasures versus the sophisticated Epicurean who carefully calculates the action leading best to his longterm happiness.

You describe virtue ethics as a tool "that may work at one moment, but be disastrous at the next moment." My contention is that: if a virtue can be momentarily dropped the instant it is deemed contrary to longterm happiness, the benefits of that virtue for one's character will not be fully achieved (if at all).

I ought to modify my conclusion a bit. Initially I claimed that a decision procedure of virtue ethics and a belief system (value structure) of Epicureanism is the best way to live, and now thanks to your Laertius quote that is considered not at all controversial. It is actually a bit exciting to see such affirmation in that quote. But the objection I am levying, I think, has deeper implications that make it impossible to have virtue ethics as an effective decision-procedure if the true end goal is happiness.

I am an honest man - but when my longterm happiness suffers from telling the truth, I lie.

I am a loyal man - but when my longterm happiness suffers from the endeavor, I abandon it.

I am a courageous man - but I would never do something that I calculate to be overly hard to win. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." (Letter to Menoeceus)

These virtues are only virtues insofar as they contribute to the end goal. This may not be a problem for an Epicurean. But it is clear that these virtues are not firm if they are conditional to that degree. If a virtue is not firm, you are unreliable in your ability to manifest them. It is very apparent in everyday life when someone does something of seemingly no benefit whatsoever to themselves, because they believe it is a virtuous thing to do. Likewise it is even more obvious when someone does something virtuous that also perfectly correlates with their longterm happiness. People who see this don't necessary think much of the virtuous act because it was prudent anyway. We revere the man who jumps on the grenade but scowl at the politician who publicly donates \$1m to Africa. It's the motive.

I noticed as I was writing my reply that you responded to my response to Hiram. I don't want to send you a wall of text, but I should add on with my response to that post:

Your responses to my three analogies are very interesting and I have not heard those positions before, so I am excited to explore the new territory. Please correct me if I misinterpret what you're claiming.

"Ultimately [nature] gives us nothing more than pleasure and pain by which to judge the desirability of all things."

Does she not also give us rationality? Without rationality, we would all be heroin addicts, injecting a substance that causes immense pleasure until a sudden death (forgive me for using this example but it is very convenient). We need not only the capacities for pleasure and pain, and the intuitive abilities to distinguish them, but also the rational capacity in order to be sophisticated and calculated in our pursuit of them. Things which seemingly have no "pleasure content" must be pursued, of a variety of sorts, for greater pleasure in the end. We are not born masters of this skill, and it requires a great amount of rationality. Even with rationality we make mistakes and are always improving.

Now if we accept rationality as a guide for action, along with pleasure and pain, we may get sucked into a Kantian ethical theory which decides to take rationality as *the* guiding principle of action, instead of pleasure and pain... But that's a bit off-topic (would be interesting to explore elsewhere).

If we must look only at pleasure and pain to show the sociopath's killings to be truly immoral, it seems very simple. The amount of pain he is inflicting in killing many babies is astronomical and is surely greater than the pleasure he receives from the killing. That is a utilitarian argument which might be another can of worms, so feel free to ignore it because there is a more important one:

In the end we cannot live or organize society *without* this intuitive appeal to right and wrong I am suggesting. You appeal to it as well: "If we think that some mechanism ought to be in place to discourage those results..." But why should we think anything at all of it? There is no absolute to point to, as you said - only pleasure and pain. And if we are not adopting a utilitarian interpretation of Epicureanism, we have no reason at all to think a mechanism discouraging those horrific results should be in place.

If the regulating mechanism ought to be in place, then you open Epicureanism either to intuitionism or to utilitarianism. Without getting too flowery, I can't help but draw a parallel with the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these Truths to be **self-evident**, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness..."

There must be intuitive truths about how humans ought to conduct behavior toward one another that goes outside the limit of the hedonistic calculus. Any regulatory mechanism in society must appeal to these. I believe these truths are based fundamentally in our biology, and that our intuition is a result of natural selection, and partially this is why Epicureanism seems so intuitive to its followers (it does to me).