

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Pivot" of January 10, 2019 at 11:58 AM

The reason I put "strong ambitions" is because it seems that certain endeavors require extreme sacrifice without any *visible* potential for future reward of long-term happiness. An Epicurean would likely abandon the ambition if it looked like it would involve more pain than happiness. But for the strongest of ambitions happiness must be largely disregarded, and the ambition must be put at the forefront. This, as I define it, is an altruistic sacrifice for an ambition. Altruistic sounds a bit strange here, I agree. I am using altruistic to describe the sacrifice of one's happiness for an ambition/person.

Take Elon Musk for example. If he wanted to maximize his net happiness, he would surely leave Tesla and SpaceX and live out a relaxing, extravagant life with his many billions. But he chooses to work day and night, year-round, in order that his ambitions (space travel, smart cars, etc) might become a reality. He values his ambitions more than his happiness, and because of this he is able to put his happiness aside for his ambitions to come true. You might argue that his happiness is inextricably linked to his ambitions, and when he pursues his ambition he is actually pursuing happiness: "And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure." I agree with this! However, my point is this: if happiness is the sole consideration for one's decisions, he is not likely to embark on ambitions which require great long-term sacrifice. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." Yet those things which are hard to win are sometimes the most valuable - imagine if Elon Musk takes humanity to Mars with SpaceX.

As to the second issue, the source I'm attempting to appeal to is intuition based in reason. Using your example, the murderer who tortures babies: surely this is unjust. If the definition of injustice does not include horrible acts such as this, we should think the definition is improper. To a certain degree, our arguments must coincide with our intuition in order to make sense. Intuition, I think, is the primary basis for Epicurean thought entirely: pleasure is the highest good. Why? It does not need an answer as to "why," because it is self-evident. Likewise, it is self-evident that the prolonged torture of babies is unjust.

(I modified the example from the killing of babies to the torture of babies because it may be argued that death alone is not a misfortune)