

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2019 at 3:50 PM

Ok we are making good progress -

1) When you write: "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." <<< You are pointing out a perceived contradiction between the natural and necessary discussion and any pleasure which requires lots of exertion to obtain. I agree that someone who interprets the "natural and necessary" passages too rigorously is going to make that error, but I don't think it is necessary to lay that error at the feet of Epicurus. This point fits very closely with my argument about the part of the letter to Menoeceus that says "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul." Yes I know the translations say that, and maybe they are even accurate to what Epicurus did write, but I think both of these issues (natural/necessary and pleasure=absence of pain) have to be taken in the overall context of the philosophy that would have been firmly established in the mind of any Epicurean student before he read that letter.

Even within the letter to Menoeceus itself there are other passages that also taken separately would totally contradict the ascetic interpretation of those passages, and so what we're getting at here is that it is essential to take the philosophy as a whole and to interpret any apparent ambiguities or apparent contradictions in a way that is consistent with the message of the whole. So I agree that a standard academic interpretation of Epicurus is going to be vulnerable to the charge you are making. I simply think that the standard academic interpretation of Epicurus is largely worthless and not worth defending, so I take the DeWitt approach as amplified by Gosling & Taylor, [Nikolsky](#), and Wentham on the nature of Epicurean pleasure.

2) I would argue that death alone is probably a "misfortune" so I would have no issue with argument based on that. It's definitely not something to be desired expect at those times when future pain will outweigh future pleasure. This is another issue where I would deviate from what I gather to be the academic consensus. They take the position you suggest, but I think that Epicurus would definitely say that the longer life can contain greater pleasure so would generally be preferred than the shorter life. That's another extremely interesting issue to discuss and develop over time. But the heart of the issue is this:

"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." << in a universe where "fate" and absolute principles do not exist, i do not believe you are safe

in saying "surely." The "surely" implies facts not in evidence. Would it be possible to say that torture is **always** improper? There are lots of people who would argue that torture of one terrorist to save an innocent city from an atomic bomb would be totally proper. Can we "surely" say that torture of the terrorist's baby, or five or ten or any number of terrorist babies, to save that innocent city from atomic bombing would be improper? I doubt we can - at least I would be willing to entertain it myself, and I won't admit that that makes me a monster. 😊

Now you are returning to "intuition based in reason" for your sanction. As you know I think that there are very interesting questions revolving around the nature of anticipations in Epicurean thought, and to what extent they are related to intuitions. I know DeWitt rather strongly saw them as analogous. And there are related issues in regard to the faculty of pleasure -- from where does the programming that decides what we find pleasurable and painful come? So I think there is potential for common ground on "intuition" playing a role here, so long as the suggestion is not that intuition is programmed by supernatural gods, or by ideal forms existing in another dimension. But as to "reason" I would strongly insist with Epicurus that "with the assistance of reason" is the best that can be said for reason. Computers have no feelings of pleasure or any other "goal" other than what is given to them by their programmers. I see reason as a "tool" not unlike hammers and screwdrivers and compasses and plumb lines and the rest -- all very valuable to assisting us in projecting out consequences of future actions, but never providing in themselves any motivation to pursue any of those future actions.