Do Pigs Value Katastematic Pleasure? (Summer 2022 K / K Discussion)

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An excerpt from “Epicureans, Earlier Atomists, and Cyrenaics” by Stefano Maso:

“According to Epicurus this is happiness, technically the *katastematic pleasure*:

the well-established condition or state of the body in which pleasure does not change (*On the Goal*, fr. 22.3 Arrighetti).

[...]

It is crucial to note that natural but non-necessary desires are based on the varying of the perceptual experience.

These various forms of desire are precisely what enable Epicurus to develop a conception of pleasure that distinguishes between kinetic pleasure [*kata kinêsin hêdonê*] and static or katastematic pleasure [*katastêmatikê hêdonê*]. The kind of pleasure that varies constitutes the explicit foundation of Cyrenaic thought: Cyrenaics do not admit katastematic pleasure.

By contrast, Epicurus accepts both kinds of pleasure and assures his readers that freedom from disturbance [*ataraxia*] and absence of pain [*aponia*] are static pleasure; but joy [*chara*] and delight [*euphrosunê*] are regarded as kinetic activities (DL 10.137).

It seems as though the unbridled physical enjoyment of pleasure constitutes the heart of the Cyrenaics’ hedonistic ethics. The pursuit of pleasure thus translates, in their view, into the experiencing of a pleasure that varies in terms of both quality and intensity. The corollary to this is that, precisely because there is no limit to the quality and intensity of pleasure, the pleasure of the Cyrenaics proves disappointing, since it endlessly defers the possibility of satisfaction.

According to the Cyrenaics, we can distinguish three states: one in which we are in pain,

and which is like a storm at sea; a second one in which we experience pleasure, and which is like a gentle swell—for pleasure is a smooth movement; and a third, intermediate state in which we feel neither pain nor pleasure, and which is like a flat calm (*PE* 14.18.32 = IVB5 Giannantoni). Man seems to perceive these three states alone; moreover, from the Cyrenaics' perspective, it is pointless to carry the enquiry any further, for example by searching for the cause of these different states.

By contrast—and evidently in polemical opposition to the Cyrenaics—the Epicureans believe that pleasure is pleasure, and pain is pain and that there can be no intermediate state between them. Pleasure is found where there is and for as long as there is no pain, just as pain is found where there is no pleasure and as long as there is no pleasure: the removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures (*KD* 3–4; *LS* 21C). Moreover, every pleasure *qua* pleasure is good, and every pain *qua* pain is bad (*Ep. Men*. 129; LS 21B3).

But how is it possible to deny the existence of an intermediate state, a state that everyday human experience seems to entail? Why does Epicurus choose to go down this route?

We can try to answer by relying on the interpretation Cicero gives us of the controversy between Democritus, Cyrenaics and Epicureans. While this interpretation clearly derives from doxographical contributions, there is no doubt it reflects a historical and persistent rivalry between the different schools.

Cicero—a critical yet attentive reader of Epicurean texts—tackles the issue we have posed directly, especially in Book 2 of *De finibus* and Book 3 of the *Tusculanae disputationes.* 18 First of all, Cicero believes that Epicurus contradicts himself, because in his view the philosopher believes not so much that the absence of pain can accompany the absence of pleasure, but rather that pleasure and the absence of pain de facto coincide, constituting a sort of analgesic hedonism (cf. Tusc. 3.47 = *KD* 18). Therefore, the ultimate good would simultaneously coincide with the absence of pain and the highest degree of pleasure. Furthermore, Cicero emphasizes that, in his approach to ethics, Epicurus has

separated the highest good (which coincides with pleasure) from virtue. In doing so, he has created an unbridgeable gulf between the physical and the spiritual dimension. Cicero's ultimate thesis is the diametric opposite: "Pleasure is one thing, absence from suffering quite another [*aliud est voluptas, aliud non dolere*]."19 In other words, suffering is the opposite of its own absence, and not the opposite of pleasure (De Fin. 2.28). Cicero here is adopting the thesis of Hieronymus of Rhodes, the Peripatetic philosopher (third century BCE), according to whom the experience of pleasure and the absence of pain are two different things (De Fin. 2.9).

To avoid possible misunderstandings, Cicero introduces an example: he asks whether the pleasure we feel when drinking is the same as that which we experience after having quenched our thirst. The answer is very important: according to Torquatus (the champion of the Epicurean thesis in Cicero's dialogue), once our thirst has been quenched, we enjoy a stable pleasure; whereas during the actual act of quenching our thirst we experience an unstable pleasure, i.e. a pleasure in movement (*De Fin*. 2.9–10). However, this means assigning the same name, pleasure, to two different kinds of pleasure; and, according to Cicero, this is incorrect, as is the notion of "variation" [*varietas*] when it is introduced to deny the radical difference between stable pleasure and kinetic pleasure. It is untenable to argue that *kinetic pleasure* (i.e. pleasure that "varies") must be added to and coincide with *stable pleasure,* which "does not vary" (i.e. "absence from suffering"). According to Cicero, Epicurus' theory resembles an attempt to combine Hieronymus' theory with that of the Cyrenaic Aristippus (*De Fin*. 2.19)—an absurdity.

By contrast, precisely the connection between "stability" and "perception" is key to explaining the reason the Epicureans theorized the absoluteness of "katastematic pleasure," namely the kind of pleasure that does not vary. Epicurus himself would appear to have been the first to draw a distinction between the two kinds of pleasure (DL 10.136 = LS 21R), by emphasizing that only the former is perfect and lasting, whereas the latter is

temporary. The instability of kinetic pleasure, and its reduction to a mere physical condition to be brought back to stability (which is to say, to katastematic pleasure), is the key to understanding the Epicurean position. Reason is what brings this “reduction” about: it rests on the realization that variation—which constitutes kinetic pleasure—is actually entirely superfluous, given that any experience of freedom from pain coincides with the highest good: “pleasure exists everywhere, and for the entire time it lasts, there is no suffering either of body or of mind or both” (*KD* 3). This implies that the intermediate state—the one which, according to Hieronymus and Cicero, makes the *absence of pain* different from the *presence of pleasure*, even though the two may go hand in hand—is meaningless, which is why Epicurus rejects it.

It may be noted that the ancient atomists did not distinguish between the two kinds of pleasure. Rather, Democritus observed that the ultimate goal which man must set himself is contentment [euthymia]: only by finding satisfaction in what we have and what is proper to our nature, and by appreciating what befalls us, can we attain safety and absence of apprehension [athambia], and well-being (Stobaeus, Anthology 3.1.210, LM 27D226–231 = DK 68B3, 189, 191; A1, 167, 169. See 133.1–4, 152.1–4, 139.1, 137.1 Leszl). “Contentment” seems to foreshadow katastematic pleasure, insofar as it consists in the capacity to limit desire and pleasure. We can ask if a specific connotation distinguishes the denominations with which Clement of Alexandria20 labels the ultimate end [telos] that Democritus’ successors identified. And whereas Democritus identifies telos with euthymia or euestô (contentment and feeling good), Nausyphanes (Epicurus’ teacher) uses the word akataplêxia (absence of fright). But according to Clement, the akataplêxia of Nausyphanes corresponds to the athambia (absence of apprehension) attributed to Democritus. Furthermore, Anaxarchus of Abdera, one of the first followers of Democritus, proposed the apatheia (the absence of passions) and the adiaphoria (the indifference to external things) as means to reach the eudaimonia (happiness). However, it is evident that only Democritus defines telos

(the ultimate end/the purpose) positively: all the other words are qualified by the presence of the “privative alpha”—a prefix meant to indicate the negation of a word—and seem to allude to happiness as the result of a process of “reduction” in the human psycho-physical experience, the exact process that can also be recognized in the way Epicurus conceives of katastematic pleasure.

The Cyrenaics’ interpretation of pleasure leads them instead to acknowledge the distinction between the two kinds of pleasure. However, this theory denies that it is *de facto* possible to grant katastematic pleasure. Given the varied and successive way in which we experience pleasures, we can grasp only kinetic pleasure or katastematic pleasure, either successively or not at all, and any increase in pleasure is kinetic.

Unlike that of the Cyrenaics, Epicurus and Lucretius’s interpretation is intended as a renewed version of Democritus’ position. By introducing a distinction between two different kinds of pleasure, the Epicureans also reach another remarkable conclusion: the idea that contentment is already a katastematic pleasure in itself. Clearly, it is possible to grasp different facets of such pleasure, which present themselves as *varietas* and hence as kinetic pleasure. Epicurus and Lucretius are aware that it is the task of reason to process this *varied* sensory experience, in such a way that each specific detail may be positively appreciated and grasped in the most pregnant possible way [*katapuknôsis*]. Epicurus gives great weight to cogitation [*logismos* and *phronesis*] and, ultimately, reason (which is to say the mind, *psuchê*), demanding that they be capable of grasping and focusing on the pleasurable aspects of life, so that negative ones may be considered absent (and be de facto eliminated).

But if the physical side of the experience of pleasure constitutes the point of departure, the point of arrival is the rational processing of this experience. In *The Letter to Menoeceus* (129–130 = LS 21B3) Epicurus writes:

Every pleasure, because of its natural affinity, is something good, yet not every pleasure is choice worthy. Correspondingly, every pain is something bad, but not

every pain is by nature to be avoided. However, we have to make our judgment on all these points by a calculation and survey of advantages and disadvantages. For at certain times we treat the good as bad and conversely the bad as good.

Consequently, Epicurus—opposing the Cyrenaics—can argue that, even in the apparently most painful moments, the wise man is capable of being happy: for, if needs be, he knows how to concentrate on the sheer fact of being alive. At this point, "being alive" may be seen to coincide with katastematic pleasure. Epicurus states as much in a letter to his mother: "When we are alive, we experience a joy akin to that of the gods" (*PHerc*. 176 5 X Vogliano = fr. 72.38–40 Arrighetti). Even his spiritual testament, which is to say the letter addressed to his friend Idomeneus and transmitted by Diogenes Laertius, bears witness to this. The philosopher maintains that the day in which he is dying is a blessed one, even though his bladder and bowl pains could hardly be more intense (*Letter to Idomeneus* = DL 10.22).

Aristippus' Hedonic Presentism and Epicurus' Doctrine of Limits

According to the Cyrenaic Aristippus, pleasure persists and has value only as long as we are experiencing it. His grandson, Aristippus the Younger, thinks that a "unitemporal" present pleasure constitutes *de facto* the happiness that every man must propose to himself as an end. No doubt that this experience of pleasure is, moreover, an essentially physical experience. We observe that there is a strong emphasis on the physical dimension and the instantaneousness of the perception of pleasure; it is a real limitation that aims to capture only the most obvious character of pleasure: intensity. The Cyrenaics renounce the lasting experience of pleasure because their focus is the intensity of the instant in which man experiences pleasure. The Cyrenaics focus on the search for an ever more intense and varied experience of pleasure in order to guarantee the intensity of the present perception and avoid the distraction involved in waiting for an uncertain future. Kinetic pleasure is the actual limit of the Cyrenaic ethics.

By contrast, it is important to understand the ethical basis of Epicurus' doctrine, and, in particular, its therapeutic proposal. Every Epicurean master and every reader of Epicurean texts considers the "fourfold cure" [*tetrapharmakos*] a crucial element in Epicurean doctrine. Lucretius himself, while not directly referring to this doctrine, no doubt bore it in mind when composing his poem. Cicero explicitly mentions the Key Doctrines in which Epicurus summed it up. Even Philodemus of Gadara explicitly mentions the theory.25 Epicurus pithily expressed it as follows: "Were we not upset by the worries that celestial phenomena and death might matter to us, and also by failure to appreciate the limits of pains and desires, we would have no need for natural philosophy" (KD 11 = LS 25.B.11; cfr. KD 1–4, 10, 20, and Ep. Men. 133).

It is interesting to note that the *tetrapharmakos* also rests on a doctrine of the "limit"; this time, however, in an Epicurean version. This doctrine applies to everything that exists and is perceived within the cosmos. Take atoms: we have isolated atoms that eternally fall and never combine with others; but we also have atoms that combine into endless, more or less changeable structures. The gods constitute the ultimate "limit" of this changeability, for they are *eternally stable* atomic compounds. They never change because, by definition, they are intangible: they never collide with other atoms or other compounds. Take death: by definition, it never has anything to do with life. It constitutes the "limit" of life. Take pain and, in parallel, pleasure: each constitutes the other's "limit."

Based on this doctrine of the "limit," Epicurus infers that we must not fear the gods, because they are imperturbable and, hence, take no interest in us or interfere with other atomic compounds (*Ep. Men*. 123–124). We must not fear death, because when it exists, we do not; and as long as we are alive, we cannot perceive it (*Ep. Men*. 124–127). We must not fear pain, because it may be more or less intense: if it is light, it is so easily endurable that at its limit it can be perceived as pleasure; if it is extreme, a loss of sensibility occurs and we no longer feel it (KD 4). Finally, we must not fear pleasure, in the sense that we

must not fear the *dissatisfaction* that affects those who give themselves over to the pursuit of the most intense and prolonged sort of kinetic pleasure, as did the Cyrenaics, for kinetic pleasure finds its limit in katastematic pleasure (*Ep. Men*. 131–132).

This is exactly the opposite of what the Cyrenaics claim. Although both consider the "limit" as an inevitable psychophysical border, the experience of the limit leads the Cyrenaics to renounce katastematic pleasure, denying its reason; on the contrary, it leads Epicurus and the Epicureans to re-evaluate katastematic pleasure by reconsidering kinetic pleasure as an irrelevant variable."

(Maso, Stefano. "Epicureans, Earlier Atomists, and Cyrenaics". *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy,* edited by Kelly Arenson. Routledge, 2020, 60-65)