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

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 16, 2022 at 12:39 PM

An excerpt from “Epicureans on Pleasure, Desire, and Happiness” by B. A. Rider:

“Epicurus’ second important distinction between types of pleasure was more original and challenging, and its interpretation remains controversial. Epicurus evidently distinguished between kinetic pleasures—those involving some kind of “movement [*kinesis*]”—and *katastematic* (or *static*) pleasures (from “*katastema*” referring to a condition of equilibrium)—those arising from the healthy *state* of the body and mind, free from pain and disturbance. This distinction cuts across the previous one. Epicurean texts mention both mental and bodily kinetic pleasures, and mental and bodily katastematic pleasures (see, e.g., DL 10.136).

This distinction was important because, Epicurus argues, the pleasures that matter for *eudaimonia* are katastematic ones: the health and painless state of the body [aponia] and the tranquility of the mind (*ataraxia*—literally “freedom from disturbance [*tarache*]”) (Ep. Men. 128; KD 3, 18). Epicurus uses this idea to argue that pleasure has a *limit*. Once your body and mind are in a good state, the quality of your experience of life cannot be improved—it is as good as it can get. At this point, there is no need for more food, luxury, or indulgence, because adding *more* cannot make your life any better, and it may even damage your ability to experience health and tranquility in the long term.

[…]

Later, Cicero contends that the arguments supporting Epicureanism depend on a fallacy of equivocation, using “pleasure” ambiguously to make their position appear more attractive than it is. He criticizes Epicurus’ appeal to the behavior of infants:

What sort of pleasure, static [katastematic] or kinetic [...] will the bawling infant use to determine the supreme good and evil? If static, then clearly its natural instinct is for self-preservation, which I accept. If kinetic, as you in fact claim, then there will be no pleasure too foul to be experienced. Moreover, our new-born creature will not be starting from the highest pleasure, which you regard as the absence of pain.

Admittedly, infants and uncorrupted animals want to feel good; they desire sensory stimulation, kinetic pleasure. But if so, how can the baby's behavior be evidence that *katastematic* pleasure is the highest good? By conflating two very different kinds of experience and calling both "pleasure," Cicero believes, Epicurus seeks illicitly to combine the crude enticements of indulgent hedonism with the moderation and order of a theory that aims for satisfied painlessness. Cicero suggests that while such a bait-and-switch sales pitch appeals to the shallow minded, it fails as a coherent and livable ethical theory.

Is Cicero's criticism fair? In part, the issue turns on how exactly we are meant to understand the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures, and what precisely Epicureans had in mind in identifying *aponia* and *ataraxia* as the highest good. Unfortunately, on this point the surviving texts are especially fragmentary and contradictory, leaving open a variety of interpretations.

Since Cicero's *On Moral Ends* has the most detailed description of the doctrine, many interpreters use it as a starting point (including Long and Sedley 1987; Mitsis 1988; Woolf 2009). According to Cicero, Epicureans classify any pleasure that actively stimulates the senses as kinetic, involving a "movement" in sensation (De Fin. 2.10, 2.16). These sensory, kinetic pleasures include both appetite satisfactions that fill deficiencies like hunger (what we might call "restorative" pleasures) and pleasant sensations that do not fill a deficiency, such as the pleasures of hearing beautiful music or seeing a beautiful statue ("non-restorative").

This breakdown leaves katastematic pleasure as simply the *state* of being free from pain or mental disturbance. This state does not in itself "stimulate the senses" (which would make it kinetic); but we recognize that it is good because of the relief we receive when pain or distress abates (1.37).

Notice that Cicero's way of drawing the distinction plays directly into his criticisms—if only kinetic pleasures involve sensory stimulation, it becomes puzzling why katastematic pleasure is *pleasure* and why we should think of it as being the goal. Moreover, Epicurus clearly places great importance on sensory pleasure. As quoted above, he claims that he "cannot conceive of anything as good" without the pleasures of taste, sight, sound, and sex (Cicero, *Tusc*. III.18.41 = LS 21L1). But if Cicero's interpretation of the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures is right, these are kinetic pleasures, and why would he care so much about inferior, kinetic pleasures? If the mere state of being free from pain itself represents the highest limit of quality experience, why would an Epicurean need them?

For this reason, many scholars look for other ways to interpret the distinction. The debate about this topic has produced a dizzying array of interpretations. For the purposes of this chapter, I will describe just a few of the most prominent proposals.

An early attempt to reconsider the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures was made first by Diano 1935 and later by Rist 1972; Wolfsdorf 2009 defended this interpretation more recently. This interpretation accepts that all sensory pleasures are kinetic—they are "events in which the perceptual or rational faculties are smoothly or gently stimulated or activated" (252). But, on this interpretation, katastematic pleasure—the well-balanced state of body and mind—is the necessary precondition for any kinetic pleasure. A person cannot experience kinetic pleasures in a part of himself unless that part is in a pain- and disturbance-free state. Wolfsdorf explains, "perceptual pleasures [which are kinetic] reveal katastematic pleasures […] because perceptual pleasures depend on

katastematic pleasures. The smooth functioning of the perceptual faculties indicates the correlative katastematic conditions" (245). Proponents of this interpretation focus on passages like *Principal Doctrine 3*, where Epicurus states, "As long as pleasure is present, so long as it is present, there is no pain, either of body or soul or both at once" (Wolfsdorf's translation, 246). This interpretation allows for *aponia* and *ataraxia* to be fundamental (you can't have any pleasure without them), while still taking into account Epicurus' statements about the importance of sensory pleasures (since we need sensory pleasures to "reveal" the healthy state).

As an illustration, consider someone who is hungry. He is hungry, Lucretius explains (DRN 2.963–72), because certain parts of his body are disturbed and out of place and require replenishment to restore their integrity and functioning. So he eats. As he eats, he feels pleasure on his palate and throat (from tasting and swallowing the food) but that is only because *these* parts aren't disrupted. As the atoms from the food are absorbed into the body and the deficiency is remedied, the pain of hunger recedes. Wolfsdorf argues that the recession of hunger is not itself pleasurable, but it leaves us in a state that is free from pain and therefore capable of (kinetic) pleasure (252).

On this picture, then, katastematic pleasure is a state of healthy functioning, and it is a precondition for any pleasurable stimulation. Kinetic pleasure occurs when healthy, painfree parts are "moved" and stimulated. What I've called "restorative pleasures," however, don't exist, because there can be no pleasure while parts being restored are still in pain.

This interpretation has a possible problem—since it assumes, with Cicero, that all sensory pleasures are kinetic, it suffers some of the same objections: If only kinetic pleasures have a sensory quality, what is attractive about the katastematic pleasure *in itself*? On the Diano-Rist-Wolfsdorf picture, it starts to look like we seek a well-balanced state merely as means to experience kinetic pleasures. Moreover, why call the katastematic state "pleasure"? Finally, Epicurus insists that all good and bad occur in sensation (Ep. Men. 124), so

how do we perceive the goodness of *aponia* and *ataraxia*, if they have no sensory quality of their own? For these reasons, Gosling and Taylor 1982 argue for a different interpretation. They contend that, actually, *aponia* and *ataraxia* are states of sensory pleasure:

Aponia *is a condition of having sensory pleasures but with no accompanying pain, and* ataraxia *is the state of confidence that one may acquire such sensory pleasures with complete absence of pain. This confidence is itself a positive state.…What is important is to get a life of sensory pleasure untainted by pain.*

When a person is conscious in a healthy, well-balanced state, Gosling and Taylor explain,

she naturally experiences a wide variety of positive sensations: she feels warm and comfortable; tastes foods; hears sounds; enjoys the sights of things around herself. These experiences are not kinetic, as Cicero or Wolfsdorf assume, but are themselves manifestations of katastematic pleasure. Distinctively kinetic pleasures, on their view, are merely the subset of sensory pleasures involved in restoration or replenishment (373). In fact, Gosling and Taylor believe that, for Epicureans themselves, the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures wasn't really that important. It does not mark two vastly different *kinds* of pleasures, since both are sensory. The categorization has more to do with a pleasure's functional role than its inherent qualities (374).

Arenson's recent book on Epicurean pleasure (Arenson 2019) updates and adds additional nuance to Gosling and Taylor's approach. She agrees that the Epicureans' main concern was with healthy functioning, and she traces Epicurus' ideas to debates in Plato's Academy, including Eudoxus and Aristotle, about the role of pleasure and healthy functioning in a good human life. Plato takes a strong anti-hedonist position: In the Philebus, Plato's Socrates argues that pleasure cannot be the good, because pleasure occurs only in the process of filling a deficiency (53c-55c). Therefore, pleasure itself isn't the good, but instead a means to a good end: healthy functioning.

According to Arenson, Epicurus introduces the distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures in part to address these kinds of anti-hedonistic argument. Plato was right that some pleasures—kinetic pleasures—occur in the process of restoration, and these pleasures are indeed merely a means to a greater end. But, against the anti-hedonists, Epicurus argues that other pleasures—katastematic pleasures—arise from the healthy functioning itself. Arenson goes on to argue that katastematic pleasure itself has two manifestations: First, a general pleasurable quality of experience from having body and mind in a good state—a sort of non-specific pleasure of being alive, conscious, and healthy (Chapter 6). Second, there are pleasures that arise from specific activities of healthy faculties, including pleasures of seeing, hearing, and tasting. Arenson calls these “non-restorative pleasures,” because while they involve active stimulation, they do not restore deficiencies, as happens when we eat while hungry or drink while thirsty (Chapter 8). Now, these two manifestations of katastematic pleasure are not really distinct; rather, in line with Epicurus’ doctrine that the highest pleasure has a limit, the non-restorative pleasures merely “vary” but do not add to the general quality of life (KD 18).

[…]

I would suggest that the Epicureans understood this lesson, and that by defining the best experience of life as aponia and ataraxia, they aimed to capture something like this idea. Haybron’s attunement dimension corresponds most closely to Epicurean katastematic pleasure: both refer to a fundamental state of healthy functioning, security, and freedom from disturbance that makes other kinds of enjoyment possible. Epicurus realized that when a person’s mind and body are in a healthy, well-balanced state, it becomes possible for them to become engrossed in and enjoy a variety of different kinds of activities and experiences as expressions of that healthy state. Far from being ad hoc, then, Epicurus’ idiosyncratic form of hedonism may simply have been the right way to think about what makes for a

good experience of life.”

(Rider, B. A.. “Epicureans on Pleasure, Desire, and Happiness”. *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy,* edited by Kelly Arenson. Routledge, 2020, 286-91)