

Pleasure, Desire and Limits

Post by “Godfrey” of July 17, 2022 at 9:25 PM

In the Zoom call last week, we discussed pleasure being conflated with desire. I'm posting here to continue that discussion. My general premise is that people trying to discredit Epicurus have consistently conflated the two, which leads to getting caught up in endlessly discussing types of pleasure and ultimately ends with the attempt to rank pleasures.

In reviewing the [Principal Doctrines](#), there seems to be a clear distinction between pleasure and desire. [PD03](#), [PD05](#), [PD08](#), [PD09](#), [PD10](#), [PD12](#), [PD18](#), [PD19](#), [PD20](#) discuss pleasure; [PD10](#), [PD11](#), [PD15](#), [PD26](#), [PD29](#), [PD30](#) discuss desires. This quote by Stefano Maso, from a post of Nate's, got me thinking about *limits* of pleasures, pains and desires:

*"...it is important to understand the ethical basis of Epicurus' doctrine, and, in particular, its therapeutic proposal.... Epicurus pithily expressed it [the tetrapharmakos] 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 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....

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[PD11](#) (KD11) was of particular concern to me after our Zoom discussion because it mentions both pains and desires. The concern brought up in the discussion was that this was somehow advocating for an "absence of pain" position. After digesting this quote, I don't think that that's the case, although I don't think of it in the terms Maso uses in his final sentence above.

My take is this: Epicurus takes the natural goal of life to be pleasure, the natural evil to be pain. Increasing pleasure decreases pain, and vice versa. Failure to understand natural science increases pain (fear) and by the same token proper understanding increases pleasure. Failure to understand the limits of pains and desires increases pain and decreases pleasure. There's no need to worry about the limit of pleasure in this context (which Epicurus already defined in [PD03](#)) and therefore he doesn't mention it. How to understand the limit of pain? He describes this in [PD04](#): as per Maso, pain is limited by pleasure. *Pain and pleasure naturally limit each other.*

But what about the limit of desires? Reading the PDs and the Letter to Menoikeus, it becomes clear that *desires can be unlimited*, which differentiates them from both pleasure and pain. This is why the categories of desires are important to understand. These categories are a tool to help us to *impose our own limits on our desires*, which have no natural limit other than the "natural and necessary" desires. This then becomes one of the key methods to increase pleasure and reduce pain.