

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by "Pivot" of January 30, 2019 at 3:39 AM

Apologies for my infrequency here. I would like to preface by saying that, while my intention may come across as trying to pin down and prove Epicurean thought as wrong, my goal is only to examine it in order to understand certain claims; that I may see them clearer after discussion.

Cassius:

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"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."

How else ought they be interpreted? The problem I see is that it is written is very explicitly. "Whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win." And also, as we discussed a while back, PD3: "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. [...]" It is very difficult for me to interpret this quote in any other way than what is explicitly stated. That is, when all pain is removed, that state of ataraxia and aponia are the LIMIT with respect to pleasure. I can't conceive of this in a way somehow allowing this to NOT be the limit, unless something is to be said about mistranslation, or a hole in the principle doctrines. Or even that certain modification is necessary.

2) I agree that in special circumstances, horrible acts can be justified. But notice in the example you give of torturing babies to prevent an atomic bomb, the justification is implicit. We intuit more lives to be more valuable than fewer lives, and then we use rationality to understand that in one example, more lives are lost. But let's paint the example differently, to prevent these self-justifying cases. What if the babies are being tortured at no gain, other than the torturer's satisfaction? Can we really not say that this is unjust? Hiram has a response to this issue as well - "an evil act that is not discovered is still unjust per Epicurean definitions." But what defines an evil act? I cannot see how Epicurean doctrine encompasses the example we gave here into the category of evil acts.

Hiram:

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Issue 1: I agree with most of what you say here, but I still think the motivation for friendship will prevent the Epicurean from having the deepest of friendships. You mention: "sometimes in order to keep or help a friend or loved one we suffer through many things (sacrifices, in your parlance) because the PAIN of not having the friend with us is much greater than the pain we go through assisting them." This seems right until the "because". When one makes a sacrifice for a friend, does he think, "okay, I'd rather this sacrifice than to lose this friend, so I will make it to maximize my happiness"? If this is the thought, it seems a very impersonal (at best) reason to do so.

It seems to me that a friendship that constantly needs to pass the hedonic calculus is prevented from trying tests. Sometimes situations arise where the relationship no longer appears mutually beneficial. Perhaps you discover you are sacrificing a lot and not receiving much pleasure. A committed friend who sticks it out because "loyalty is a virtue," is likely more resilient, and better able to develop a strong long-term relationship than an Epicurean. The Epicurean should cut the friendship off, because after the hedonic calculus, he has determined that the relationship is going to only result in more pain than pleasure.

Even those we truly love must be weighed as some quantity of pleasure in our hedonic calculus. This seems wrong to begin with, but after further analysis it appears even more problematic for the reasons outlined above.

It should be tempting to say, "proper use of the hedonic calculus will take into consideration the pleasure of a potential strong long-term friendship." But the hedonic calculus is limited to our point of view. If everything in the situation points to the relationship giving more pain than pleasure, more sacrifice than reward, and no apparent hope for a fix, then the hedonic calculus SHOULD mandate a split. But imagine instead you stayed in the compromised relationship, simply out of loyalty to the friend? Perhaps the friend has done the same for you in difficult times. The eventual and unpredictable reward resulting from this loyalty may result in more happiness than if the hedonic calculus was used. This is the crux of the argument - that certain rewards are given only to those who do not (and CANNOT) expect them. Whether these rewards outweigh the pain endured in more unfortunate situations is unknown, but that is why this is up for discussion.

Without making this post absolutely unreadable... I'd like to just respond to JAWS' point:

I agree my framing was misleading. I should amend "ultimate goal" to "ultimate end." That is, "But what if in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate end, we end up not truly achieving it"?

I don't mean to imply happiness is a summit to be reached. I mean to highlight the fact that happiness is the true end behind all of our actions. You mention, "Our friends etc. are not means to an end, but part of what makes the climb [of life] enjoyable." Then what happens when our friends no longer make our climb enjoyable? We ought to drop them and find new

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ones that are more fun. The discussion should go similarly to the one with Hiram above.