

The pleasure ideal: Epicurean vs Cyrenaic

Post by "Cassius" of March 29, 2024 at 2:20 PM

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

For Epicurus the ultimate pleasure ideal is a continuous mental state that we have to fully immerse ourselves in and then perpetually remain in it.

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

Do we have evidence that the Epicurean ideal of stative and permanent pleasure is attainable?

I don't have the time to respond at length at the moment but in my view the premises of these statements, while often stated by commentators, have to be approached very cautiously.

The thrust of the first one is that Epicurus held that there was in fact an "ultimate pleasure ideal" in the form of a "continuous mental state." My understanding of the epicurean texts is that Epicurus held the goal of life to be "pleasure," which can best be experienced without any accompanying pain, so that the correct expression of the limit of pleasure is the total absence of pain. The suggestion that this limit of pleasure is only or primarily mental would not be consistent with the thrust of the philosophy. Both mental and bodily pleasures and pains are important, and ultimately the mental pleasures are associated with the body as well

The thrust of the second statement is that Epicurus' goal of pleasure is "stative" That might be an abstract way of talking about it but Epicurus' descriptions revolve around the *experiences* of various feelings of pleasure, rather than something that can be sufficiently described as a "state," and certainly not a mental-only state.

The example of Epicurus' last days shows that Epicurus viewed that it was possible for him to be happy even while experiencing intense physical pain, but those experiences were moment to moment and not the result of a "state" that is self-perpetuating.

Quote

The ideal life for the Cyrenaics consists in successfully chasing concrete experiences that cause direct pleasure.

For the Epicureans the ideal life consists in doing what's necessary to achieve a permanent state of pleasure and not allowing yourself to stray from it.

Epicurus too was experiencing "concrete experiences" on his last day. He held that his mental pleasures could be offset against his physical pains, and as Torquatus says the wise man is always going to find more reason for joy than for vexation.

I suppose that the "always" means that the net positive balance of pleasure over pain could be described as "permanent," but the implication of a "permanent state" is that it can never be lost once gained. I doubt that stressing the aspect of it being permanent, rather than stressing the aspect that it needs to be continually maintained, would be a very good idea.

So I don't mean this to be a flat disagreement, but I would say that the better way to describe the Cyreniac/Epicurean difference is more by focusing on Epicurus' expansion of the term pleasure to encompass every experience that is not painful, rather than by trying to consider the existence of a "plateau" that constitutes a state which, once attained, is never losable.