

Scientific Support for Psychological Hedonism

Post by “Don” of April 23, 2024 at 12:10 AM

I would agree that a term like "psychological hedonism" is only helpful up to a point. The "truth" - if we want to call it that - to me remains that...

All living beings move toward those stimuli that produce positive/pleasurable/growth-enhancing effects move away from stimuli that produce negative/painful effects.

- "Pain is different from pure *nociception*, the process of being able to detect and move away from a toxic stimulus. But pain doesn't simply register in our awareness as a marker or sign of things we should avoid out in the world. It is an experience in itself, something that we subjectively feel." ([Source](#))

Which leads me to ponder: Epicurus used the term *pathe* to refer to pain and pleasure (per Diogenes Laertius) - Πάθη δὲ λέγουσιν εἶναι δύο, ἡδονὴν καὶ ἀλγηδόνα. They say the feelings (*pathe*) are two: pleasure (*hedonen*) and pain (*algedona*).

Pathe, at its most basic, is simply "what is done or what happens to a person." There is no evaluative feature, at its most basic, involved in *pathe*. It is literally "what is done or what happens to a person."

Which leads me to ask: Is Epicurus talking about basic *nociception* when he refers to pain? "Nociception provides a means of neural feedback that allows the central nervous system (CNS) to detect and avoid noxious and potentially damaging stimuli in both active and passive settings. The sensation of pain divides into four large types: acute pain, nociceptive pain, chronic pain, and neuropathic pain." ([Source](#))

I don't think so, at least not quite. We've talked before on this forum about pre-cognitive/pre-rational/pre-evaluative nature of the Canon, including *pathe*/feelings. I get the idea from reading the Epicurean texts that pleasure and pain come unbidden. We "experience" these feelings. They happen to us without our volition. We "experience" pleasure whether we want to or not. We "experience" pain whether we want to or not. That is the "truth" that Epicurus and the Epicureans are working with. The natural well-functioning of a living being is to feel positively/pleasure when something pleasant happens to us and to feel negatively/pain when something "noxious or potentially damaging" is happening to us.

Now, that doesn't mean we don't suffer from pain, but suffering is separate from the experience of pain. Experiments have been done where subjects can endure the "pain" of their hand in an ice bath longer if they're allowed to swear, curse, yell, howl, etc. If they're silent, they can't endure the pain as long. They "suffer" less if they're allowed to have agency in their behavior.

Furthermore (agreeing with [Cassius](#) above), humans have the unique ability to obfuscate and obstruct and corrupt the normal, well-functioning of the body and mind with rationalizations, dogmatic assertions, twisted ideals, empty unlimited desires, etc. It seems to me that Epicurus calls humans to get rid of all those obfuscations, obstructions, and corruptions and return to a normal, natural, healthy, well-functioning state.

That's where I come down on seeing pleasure as the telos/summum bonum/highest good. Everything a natural, well-functioning being does moves it away from "pain" and toward "pleasure." The motion is always - ultimately - toward positive stimuli, positive effects, and positive outcomes and away from "noxious or potentially damaging" stimuli, effects, and outcomes. Humans (and some animals) can "choose" to undergo hardship or pain in order to move - ultimately - to pleasure. Even a parent "choosing" to undergo pain or even death to protect their children is choosing pleasure in that they may find - even in their imagination - the prospect of not doing everything to protect their child unbearable. In fact, running into a burning building to certain death to try to save your child may very well be an application of "even on the rack, the wise one is content."