

DeWitt: "It Makes No Difference That Some Pleasures Are Static And Some Are Kinetic"

Post by "Cassius" of January 28, 2018 at 5:08 PM

Good question Maciej and I would like to get input from others on this as I admit this is hard to figure out. Here is my first effort:

I think this is another example of a doctrine that taken on its own is bewildering, but which is the kind of thing Epicurus liked to do to refute and inoculate against Platonic and other attacks on pleasure. Here, the false idea to be beaten back is that some pleasures are more worthy to be chosen than others by some outside standard of virtue, worth, nobility, or whatever. Divisions of pleasure ranked by worthiness or any standard other than pleasure itself would be fatal to Epicurean doctrine, just as believing in supernatural gods would be fatal and is inoculated against in PD1 and fearing death would be fatal and is inoculated against in PD2.

Epicurus's position was pleasure is whatever we feel to be pleasing, and there is no other criteria for judging a pleasure worthy other than the experience of pleasure itself, and the effect of a particular pleasure in leading in the future to resulting future pleasures or resulting pains. I *think* that is the sense in which DeWitt refers to the "unity of pleasure." Pleasure may differ in intensity and type and length, but it all still falls under the category of pleasure.

The way Epicurus is proving this here is to suggest the hypothetical of comparing the pleasure of eating to the pleasure of sex. If the pleasure of eating and the pleasure of sex were both hypothetically able to(1) fill the whole feeling experience of the person and (2) exist for the same length of time (I presume that is what "alike condensed in duration" means) then the experience of the pleasure of eating and the pleasure of sex would be the same for us.

If we understand that pleasure is pleasure then we aren't going to fall for the trap (and it is a trap) of thinking that some pleasures are more "worthy" than others. The trap is that if there are some pleasures that are "higher" by some standard other than pleasure, then knowledge of that standard, which is outside of pleasure, is essential. If that is the case, then the argument "pleasure is the guide / is "the good" is blown up - the highest good must be "pleasure + wisdom" or "pleasure + intelligence" or whatever. If Pleasure is the highest calling we have, then there cannot be something else which is not a part of pleasure itself which is required in order to constitute the highest and best life. That's why Epicurus insisted that all the virtues, including wisdom, prudence, etc, are simply instruments for the achievement of pleasure, and nothing more. Their existence and labeling as virtuous is dependent solely on the fact that they are tools for achieving pleasure.

I am also toying with the idea that a less important part of the context might also be to show that it is not appropriate to regret that one pleasure can't consume our entire life. The fact that pleasures can't extend to fill the whole feeling experience of the person, and that they don't consume our experience over an extended time, is what allows for variation. We know that once full, pleasure can not grow any greater in extent, it can only vary. But on the other hand, while variation may not increase the extent of pure pleasure, there's nothing wrong with variation in and of itself. In fact in general, other things being equal, it is more desirable to live two years rather than one year, with the variation in pleasure that the extra year entails. To restate that, I think Epicurus had to admit, and did state in the letter to Menoeceus, that life is desirable and so it is desirable to experience variation even for someone whose daily life is full of pleasure. So the doctrine may also be an endorsement of variation, since Nature has made it that a single pleasure cannot be expanded to fill our entire experience.

For purposes of finding this in the future we are talking about PD 9 and I will link this to that forum.