

Nature and Pleasure and Pain

Post by “Dubitator314” of August 18, 2019 at 2:04 PM

I'm an ex-Stoic, or rather close to being one, and I have a question regarding the Epicurean argument that all animals, including humans, naturally gravitate toward pleasure and avoid pain whenever possible. A Stoic argument I read attempted to counter this by providing examples of animals that would willingly endure pain and death, by fighting lions, for example, in order to defend the herd. I'm curious to know what the Epicurean response to that line of argument would be?

Post by “Joshua” of August 18, 2019 at 7:16 PM

One of the curious things about pleasure and pain is the way they've been manipulated by evolutionary processes. A parent might find themselves prepared to run any hazard to protect their offspring; this is so, not because they have ruminated on their *duty* in such a case, but because the agony of their child is more nearly felt than the agony of their own soul. I don't have children myself, and I won't claim moral and physical courage where I haven't been tried. But I *will* believe that the anguish of losing a child eclipses in full measure again the pain of dying oneself.

Now, it often happens when a person rises to the occasion in some heroic way, that they express a becoming modesty: "Any man would have done the same." But what this really means is, "Any [healthy] man would have *felt* the same".

And that's why the doomsayers are wrong about the pleasure-principle as a societal foundation. Because Nature furnishes the norm, and Nature selects for group preservation.

-josh

Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2019 at 8:10 PM

Two outstanding answers and I agree with them. These animals are not being led by gods or thinking about their duties. They feel emotions toward their offspring just as humans so and the feeling of pain of seeing them threatened, and the feeling of reward of having them safe, are their motivators just like with humans.

Ultimately there is no motivating force in life other than feeling.

Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2019 at 8:11 PM

Good grief I almost failed to realize that that was OSCAR with the first response. Good to hear from you Oscar and hope you're doing well.

Post by “Dubitator314” of August 18, 2019 at 11:26 PM

Thanks for the answers. Just to clarify, I don't think the Stoics would have necessarily said the animals had some virtuous desire to save the herd. I think their point was that there are cases where nature's way is to take the path of pain.

My initial thought was that one could argue that it's natural for everything to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, *when given the choice*. Animal instincts instilled by natural selection would preclude that choice since the act of saving the herd might be in an instinct that's hard wired into their behavior.

Although I didn't think about what JJElbert wrote about. That maybe the potential of seeing others in the herd suffer results in the animal willingly sacrificing itself for the herd. The net pain at seeing another of the herd suffer is a cost too high to pay.

Post by “Joshua” of August 19, 2019 at 12:49 AM

I was being slightly tongue-in-cheek at the mention of 'duty' 😊

I'll be the first to admit that my reading of Stoic texts is somewhat dated. *Meditations* was actually the first philosophy book I ever read, some 12 or 13 years ago, and was the nearest thing to my 'handbook' as I transitioned from High School to College. I had a list of Benjamin Franklin's 12 virtues from his *Autobiography* tacked on to the corkboard in my dormitory. And when I went to Rome after Sophomore year I made a point of paying my respects to Marcus Aurelius on the Capitoline Hill, as well as visiting his Column.

There are things I'm happy to have "grown out of", as it were; and pessimism is one of them. It will be argued that Stoicism is not actually pessimistic; that it is not dour, but the shortest --if steepest--path to joy. Buddhists will say the same of their monks.

But if pleasure is the end, let us make pleasure the path. Not the straight and narrow way to the monastic mountaintop, difficult to trod--

Quote

where Stoics speak only to Cynics, and Cynics speak only to God--¹

but the low and easy sun-dappled lane through fair country. *Do you doubt the way? Let Epicurus be your guide.*²

Welcome to the forum!

-josh

¹Tongue once again firmly in cheek 😊

²Frances Wright, *A Few Days in Athens*

Post by "Godfrey" of August 19, 2019 at 1:50 PM

This doesn't specifically deal with sacrificing oneself for another and may be obvious, but is a key part of the pleasure/pain equation so I'll throw it in here:

Quote

...because this is the primary and inborn good, we do not choose every pleasure. Instead, we pass up many pleasures when we will gain more of what we need from doing so. And we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, if we experience a

greater pleasure for a long time from having endured those pains. So every pleasure is a good thing because its nature is favorable to us, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen — just as every pain is a bad thing, yet not every pain is always to be shunned. It is proper to make all these decisions through measuring things side by side and looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, for sometimes we treat a good thing as bad and a bad thing as good. (Letter to Menoeceus)

Post by “Hiram” of August 19, 2019 at 4:14 PM

Ants are collectivist up to the point where they give their lives for the colony ... but mammals are not. The key to understand Epicurean ethics is in PD 20: nature should not be forced. The move from is to ought is not experienced by sentient beings as strongly as some philosophers seem to think. What Epicurus is saying is that we should follow our nature.

Also E says that from time to time we will see a sage giving his life for a friend or loved one. The way this passes hedonic calculus is that we love the person so much that without them life is not worth living. Metrodorus also said we go through great pains for friends because we wish to avoid the pain of not having them.

Post by “Martin” of August 20, 2019 at 11:04 AM

"... that we love the person so much that without them life is not worth living ..." does not make sense because this would accept suicide out of mourning, which is not Epicurean because we have coping techniques to get over the mourning.

The way this passes hedonic calculus is rather that we love the person so much that we take great risks of losing our own life to avoid the pain of not having tried to save the friend.

Moreover, if the action is spontaneous, it is rather out of a strong feeling to help the friend urgently than to contemplate hedonic calculus first.

Post by “Elayne” of August 21, 2019 at 3:04 PM

Catching up here-- and I see that part of my post today on FB is relevant and echoes what others have said:

"VS 56 The wise man feels no more pain when being tortured himself than when his friend tortured.

VS 57 On occasion a man will die for his friend, for if he betrays his friend, his whole life will be confounded by distrust and completely upset. (both of these translations I got from epicureanfriends.com and there is a note that these have been reconstructed).

These last two quotes are very important, IMO. We are not being advised to feel pain or to die for friends as if to be virtuous-- these are descriptive quotes. They are observations of what true friendship feels like-- that we are so connected to our friends that their pleasures and pains cause us pleasures and pains. Although friendship must be mutual to be real, the feelings themselves are not contractual. There is not a cold calculation that we use, nor logic, minus feelings, when it comes to our friends, because we love them with all our hearts."