

Boris Nikolsky: "Epicurus On Pleasure" - Re-examining the Katastematic / Kinetic Question

Post by "Cassius" of March 11, 2017 at 5:49 PM

[Boris Nikolsky - Epicurus on Pleasure](#)

Boris [Nikolsky](#) - Epicurus on Pleasure - ABSTRACT: The paper deals with the question of the attribution to Epicurus of the classification of pleasures into 'kinetic' and 'static'. This classification, usually regarded as authentic, confronts us with a number of problems and contradictions. Besides, it is only mentioned in a few sources that are not the most reliable. Following Gosling and Taylor, I believe that the authenticity of the classification may be called in question.

The analysis of the ancient evidence concerning Epicurus' concept of pleasure is made according to the following principle: first, I consider the sources that do not mention the distinction between 'kinetic' and 'static' pleasures, and only then do I compare them with the other group of texts which comprises reports by Cicero, Diogenes Laertius and Athenaeus. From the former group of texts there emerges a concept of pleasure as a single and not twofold notion, while such terms as 'motion' and 'state' describe not two different phenomena but only two characteristics of the same phenomenon. On the other hand, the reports comprising the latter group appear to derive from one and the same doxographical tradition, and to be connected with the classification of ethical doctrines put forward by the Middle Academy and known as the *divisio Carneadea*. In conclusion, I argue that the idea of Epicurus' classification of pleasures is based on a misinterpretation of Epicurus' concept in Academic doxography, which tended to contrapose it to doctrines of other schools, above all to the Cyrenaics' views.

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2018 at 1:55 AM

What happens when you go down the path of separating static and active pleasure, and concluding that static pleasure is the goal of life? You end up concluding things that are totally counterintuitive like "Epicurus does not consider joy to be a kind of pleasure," as did Jeffrey S. Purinton, *Phronesis*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1993), pp. 281-320:

III. *Distinguishing joy from pleasure*

Having established, then, that Epicurus holds that “all that in which we rejoice is pleasure,” let us consider what this thesis entails. It entails, to begin with, that Epicurus does not consider “joy” to be a kind of pleasure, as is usually assumed. For, had Epicurus wished to claim that joy is a pleasure, he would have had to claim that this pleasure is itself something in which we rejoice (since he defines pleasure as that in which we rejoice), and this would lead to an infinite regress: the joy we take in *this* pleasure would itself have to be a pleasure in which we rejoice, and *this* pleasure would have to provide us with a *further* joy, and so on *ad infinitum*. We should rather conclude, then, that Epicurus does not think of joy as a pleasure, but as the intentional state which has pleasure as its intentional object.

Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2018 at 2:16 AM

Here is another conclusion from the same source (Purinton) that seems equally absurd to me, and which also results from the fixation on katastematic as the goal. Purinton suggests that even though Epicurus held katastematic pleasure to be the primary aim, we do so "with the understanding that we will also sometimes enjoy kinetic pleasures as well." If you find this kind of conclusion satisfying then more power to you, but the better course in my view is to accept the clear meaning of the Lucretius passages which Purinton cites, follow [Nikolsky](#), and reject the view that Epicurus considered the static/active distinction to be different types of pleasure. That way neither you nor Epicurus falls into the trap of hair-splitting like this:

This, then, I believe, is how Epicurus would reconcile his claim that katastematic pleasure is the *telos* with his claim that the good cannot be conceived if all kinetic pleasures are removed: the key is to see that one makes katastematic pleasure one's end only on the assumption that doing so will also allow one to enjoy kinetic pleasures – and, indeed, purer kinetic pleasures, and more of them, at least in the long term. For the good life must certainly include kinetic pleasures, since, as Lucretius puts it, “our nature cries out for nothing but that pain be absent from the body *and* that the mind enjoy pleasant sensation, free of care and fear (*mensque⁶² fruatur iucundo sensu cura semota metuque*).”⁶³ Our nature cries out, i.e., not only for painlessness and fearlessness, but also for the pleasant sensation of kinetic pleasure. And these things, Lucretius adds, are easy to procure. For our bodily nature needs few things, “just whatever remove (*demant*) pain in such a way that (*uti*) they are also sometimes able (*possint*) to provide gratifyingly many delights.”⁶⁴ We need, i.e., only the things which rid our bodies of pain but which also provide kinetic pleasures sometimes. We ought, then, to make katastematic pleasure our primary aim, but with the understanding that we will also sometimes enjoy kinetic pleasures as well.

Post by “Cassius” of July 31, 2025 at 2:39 PM

Our recent addition to the site of references to Plutarch, with links by Don and even a PDF by Tau Phi, have led me to want to come back to the references to Plutarch made by Boris [Nikolsky](#) in his article "Epicurus On Pleasure."

I know that it can be difficult to read and work with PDFs, and since this article explains the position on Pleasure taken by Gosling and Taylor in "The Greeks On Pleasure," which is referenced by Emily Austin as being her view in "Living For Pleasure," I think it's past time for me to get a web / html version of the article together for easier reference.

I am sure there are lingering typos but it is largely ready to go here:

[Epicurus On Pleasure](#)

Anyone who finds lingering typos is welcome to report them to me here or by [email](#).

The article goes through all of the major points of contention: Cicero's arguments, Plutarch and Lucretius references to pleasure, and also the important references in Diogenes Laertius.

The view adopted by [Nikolsky](#) is implicit also in the position taken by DeWitt, but this 2001 article takes the work started by Gosling and Taylor in the chapter on Kinetic and Katastematic pleasure and presents it in a more brief and digestible way.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/156-boris-nikolsky-epicurus-on-pleasure-re-examining-the-katastematic-kinetic-questi/>