

The pleasure ideal: Epicurean vs Cyrenaic

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 29, 2024 at 2:01 PM

Let's share our perspectives on the differences between the Epicurean and Cyrenaic understandings of pleasure.

I believe that that the Epicurean conception and definition of pleasure was formulated to combat the Cyrenaic conception and definition of pleasure and that the perceived oddity of Epicurus' understanding of the term pleasure (as we see in Cicero who expresses bewilderment at how Epicurus defines it) is best understood in the context of Epicurus trying to separate his own position on pleasure from the position of the Cyrenaics.

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.

For Cyrenaics the ideal of pleasure is an active pursuit that resembles going on a hunt and it's sensually oriented. For them the ideal condition is having access to an endless cake of pleasure where you enjoy one piece at a time till you are satiated and when the satiation goes away you come back for more slices.

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.

So that's why Epicurus put the focus on the pleasures of the soul as the secure guide to a fulfilled life. Epicurean pleasures are permanent while Cyrenaic pleasures oscillate between fulfillment and satiation.

Of course, Epicurus doesn't reject the sensual pleasures that Cyrenaics favored but for him they serve a secondary function as ornaments and auxiliaries to pleasure and do not constitute the primary focus of the whole pleasure enterprise.

Do we have evidence that the Epicurean ideal of stative and permanent pleasure is attainable? Plenty. One example is the Piraha tribe. Daniel Everett described the Piraha as living in a state of permanent happiness and joy. Another researcher remarked that if we tried to measure the amount of time in a day they spend laughing and smiling they would probably come out as the happiest people on earth.

In the video below a Piraha man is talking in his language. And you can definitely see that there's a permanent smile and a permanent glow of happiness and serenity painted on his face. This guy can safely be said to have attained ataraxia. And he is not some unusual person. The same thing has been observed to be a general feature of his people.

Do we have to live in the jungle to reach a comparable state of bliss? Of course not. But certain aspects of our social life would doubtless have to be seriously modified to rival this person in sheer eudaimonia.

There is another thing about the Piraha that reflects Epicurus' insistence on extreme empiricism.

The Piraha believe everything they see to be true and for this reason - Everett says - have a lot of trouble distinguishing fact from fiction. The Piraha are so extreme in their empiricist approach to life that they simply refuse to consider any claim unless somebody they know has been a direct eyewitness to it and their language always marks for evidentiality. Their extreme empiricism also shows itself in the absence of abstract notions like numbers and counting and the absence of anything we can associate with religion like rituals or a creation story. They do believe in spirits that talk to people but only because they see them in what we can only take to be hallucinations.

The extreme empiricism of this supremely happy people (challenges and all) got me thinking that Epicurus was really up to something when he recommended exactly this approach to epistemology. The Piraha rejection of mathematical abstractions also reminded me of Epicurus' rejection of geometry.

<https://youtu.be/SHv3-U9VPAs?si=kIFbCQ8A6zw3C1HQ>

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

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

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[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 "statiive" 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.

Post by “Cassius” of March 31, 2024 at 9:17 AM

Thanks Martin for pointing out to me that there is more to discuss here in terms of the empiricism aspect, which is also something to contrast to Epicurus (that he was not so extreme an empiricism).

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 31, 2024 at 11:13 AM

It's difficult to see Epicurean pleasure as something other than a static process when we see Epicurus writing things like that:

"We have need of pleasure when we are in pain from its absence : but when we are not feeling such pain, though we are in a condition of sensation, we have no need of pleasure. For the pleasure which arises from nature does not produce wickedness, but rather the longing connected with vain fancies."

" The stable condition of well-being in the body and the sure hope of its continuance holds the fullest and surest joy for those who can rightly calculate it."

Intense pleasures that cause movement are perfectly fine and there's absolutely no reason not to encourage them as long as one doesn't struggle with controlling them. But struggle with pleasures is usually the norm rather than the exception among humans.

Daniel describes how the Piraha quickly gain weight and become obese when they visit civilization for a while but lose all the excess fat gained in just a couple weeks upon their return to the tribe and then act as if nothing happened. They don't look forward to the next binge. That's a case of someone successfully enjoying himself to the fullest and then successfully avoiding dependence. When I lived in Germany I observed many young people - who were usually miserable - eagerly waiting for the weekend to arrive so they can get wasted drinking insane amounts of alcohol. That's the antithesis to the Piraha case. The Piraha live for today. Not for the weekend.