

Karl Popper and the question: Is it worse to suffer pain than it is good to experience pleasure?



Post by "Cassius" of May 16, 2018 at 8:42 AM

[Over at the Facebook group](#) this question was asked:

Poster: I have been intrigued by the rather famous remark of Karl Popper which states that evil has more weight than good. Or at least that there is "no symmetry between pain and pleasure". Popper believed that it is ultimately worse to suffer pain than it is good to experience pleasure because when we see a person suffering, a moral demand is made upon us to help alleviate that. But when we see a person experiencing pleasure no moral demand is placed on us to increase such pleasure. As Epicureans who insist on pleasure as the Good and pain/suffering as evil, how do you respond to this? Is Popper correct or are pleasure and pain a 1 to 1 relationship? Note: I side with Popper

Cassius: Good post because it gets right to a core issue. I haven't read Popper but I totally disagree with your summary of Popper's position. I disagree that (1) it is worse to experience pain than it is good to experience pleasure (if so then commit suicide!). I disagree (2) that a "moral demand is made on us" simply because we witness suffering. A "moral demand"? By whom? "Moral demands" of that type are totally illusory and pure idealism. If I see a friend in pain then it pains me. If I see an enemy in pain in many circumstances I can take pleasure in it. It all depends on context and categorical assertions of universalism are totally without foundation.

Poster: I think an Epicurean response to (1) is that killing oneself (or the benevolent world-explode argument) is an unnatural and unnecessary desire. Unnatural because our nature does not seek its own destruction, it often does the opposite and suicide is a pain causing activity, i.e. to those left behind, to the psyche before the act is committed etc. (VS, 33 & 38). Further, I would think death, as the cessation of sensation, does no harm nor good for the person since it's equally ends pain and pleasure and the whole argument pivots on the dissymmetry between the two. To point (2), I admit my language was perhaps hastily used. Popper's exact words are "suffering makes a direct moral appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway." True, there is no strict demand, but the "call of the suffering" is still there while I suggest there is no "call of the happy".

Cassius: Well, as to (1) (that suicide is an unnatural and unnecessary desire, I do not share your premise that Epicurus held that we should only pursue those, so that isn't going to be grounds for us to find agreement (which we aren't going to find anyway, in all likelihood  or type unknown ) As to (2) I would also forcefully disagree. The "call of the happy" to share our pleasures with friends is an absolutely clear part of Epicurean philosophy as one of the most important

ways of obtaining and securing our own happiness. As to "death, does no harm nor good for the person since it's equally ends pain and pleasure" I disagree as well - the STATE OF BEING DEAD is no harm, but the ending of our ability to experience pleasure is certainly undesirable, and Epicurus clearly stated that life is desirable.

Poster: Setting (1) aside due to a fundamental disagreement between our readings of Epicurus, I think (2) is more pivotal. I might agree (I'm not staunchly opposed to the idea...) that epicurus believed increasing a person's happiness was equally as important as reducing a person suffering. What I want to know is do you think such is correct? Whether or not that's Epicurus' position, it strikes me as intuitively wrong. For example, if you saw a child fall down and break her leg at the playground your reaction would probably be to aid her and comfort her suffering rather than to make the other kids happier than they already are with clown faces and telling jokes. I think it is humanly intuitive to reduce the suffering of those who needs such rather than to increase the happiness of those who already have such.

Poster: As it relates to Epicureanism, I agree that pleasure is the good and pain is evil. But if evil presses us more toward action than does pleasure, I believe the implication would be that pain ought to be reduced in as far as is practiceable and possible. On a more societal scale, as Popper's book initially suggested, reducing avoidable suffering ought to be a legitimate function of government where as increasing pleasure ought to be the domain of the private sector. Further, I think such a commitment allows an Epicurean to take a more active role in the world rather than to retreat to his own personal "Garden". While I don't think the latter is vicious, I think the former is necessary of a philosopher.

Cassius: "I believe the implication would be that pain ought to be reduced in as far as is practiceable and possible." And if you are consistent then you would retreat to your cave and eat bread and water, except for your desire to campaign to save the world from pain, which would be irreconcilable with your personal desire to escape pain.

Cassius: For whatever reason I did not see the post from Thad which now has this: " What I want to know is do you think such is correct? Whether or not that's Epicurus' position, it strikes me as intuitively wrong. For example, if you saw a child fall down and break her leg at the playground your reaction would probably be to aid her and comfort her suffering rather than to make the other kids happier than they already are with clown faces and telling jokes. I think it is humanly intuitive to reduce the suffering of those who needs such rather than to increase the happiness of those who already have such."

The answer here is as I have indicated elsewhere in the thread. Of course I think Epicurus was correct. Only NOW has Thad submitted a specific illustration rather than a totally broad generalization. All things being equal and the child who has broken her leg standing in the same relation to me as the other children, of course the broken leg should be addressed first. But the fact that the specifics are necessary shows the error in the overbroad generalization.

And as to be expected, here is the motivation - you wish to use Epicurus to support your politics: "reducing avoidable suffering ought to be a legitimate function of government where as increasing pleasure ought to be the domain of the private sector."

That's where most arguments like this lead - someone is looking to use Epicurus to support their own predetermined favored political program. But the problem is that Epicurean theory doesn't make someone a Tory or Labor or Democrat or Republican. Epicurean theory acknowledges the reality that nature has created humans in a particular way and given them particular faculties. Today Thad can use those observations to suggest that the world should be made safe from pain, but the truth is that tomorrow the same observations can be used to justify inflicting tremendous pain on Thad and his associates should they decide to lead an invading army (or an invading horde of "migrants) that would destroy the happiness of ourselves and our friends. Epicurus clearly stated that Justice is not absolute, which is why Thad's political position is argued based on overbroad generalizations about ethics rather than from PDs 30-40.