

Boris Nikolsky's 2023 Summary Of His Thesis About Epicurus On Pleasure (From "Knife" Magazine)

Post by "Cassius" of September 6, 2025 at 5:32 PM

In another post we've got the full version of this article, but this brief section is an excellent summary of the position that the kinetic / katastematic distinction was heavily influenced by the skeptic Carneades:

Quote

— **From the comments on Cicero's treatise, you came up with an article about different types of pleasure in Epicurus. How adequately did the Roman orator translate his thoughts?**

— In the treatise "On the Limits of Good and Evil" Cicero's dependence on academic doxography is obvious. One of the main sources for him, following which he expounded the teachings of the Hellenistic schools, was Antiochus of Ascalon, a philosopher of the Platonic school. In the era preceding Antiochus, the Platonists were skeptics, they denied the possibility of an exact and unambiguous establishment of truth, primarily engaged in discussions with other schools and the refutation of their philosophical systems. An important figure in this skeptical period was Carneades. In order to analyze and criticize the ethical teachings of different philosophical schools, he came up with a way to classify them. His classification was based on the principle of thesis - antithesis - synthesis. Carneades contrasted the teachings of two schools on a particular subject, for example, on the highest good, as a thesis and antithesis. He said, for example, that the Stoics see it only in the soul, and the Epicureans - only in the body.

Applying the dichotomy of soul and body to these schools distorts our understanding of them.

Of course, both the Stoics and the Epicureans used the concept of the soul, but since they were materialists and monists, the very idea of the soul played a completely different role for them than for the Platonists. Carneades wrote that man is a combination of soul and body, and therefore the highest good must be sought in the combination of the good of the soul and the good of the body. This synthesis of thesis and antithesis was presented by the followers of Carneades as a plausible, most probable judgment, while still refraining from asserting the truth.

Antiochus of Ascalon, in a sense, makes a revolution within the academic school, becoming a dogmatist, that is, rejecting a skeptical attitude towards the knowledge of

truth. But as dogma he affirms all the same judgments that his predecessors expressed as plausible and used in criticizing their opponents. That is, for Carneades, the judgment that the highest good should be seen in the good of the soul and body together is needed only to refute the insufficient teachings of the Stoics and Epicureans, and Antiochus turns this judgment into a dogma. He traces this dogma back to the "ancients", to Plato, his very first academic students, to Aristotle and the Peripatetics, believing that he is restoring their true teaching.

In my article "Pleasure in Epicurus" I suggested that Epicurus's opposition between dynamic and static pleasures, which we find neither in Lucretius nor in Plutarch, has nothing to do with Epicurean teaching. This opposition is quite absurd. It is assumed that for Epicurus the highest form of pleasure was simply the absence of pain - static pleasure. The other type of pleasure, which consisted of movement, or kinetic, he supposedly considered inferior.

At the same time, Cicero does not give a clear definition of kinetic pleasure: in some passages, movement refers to a change in the state of the organism (for example, when we eat or drink), in others - when something affects our organs of perception (say, listening to music). These two types of movement are difficult to connect with each other.

Epicurus did indeed write that the absence of suffering is pleasure, and even the highest pleasure, but he by no means rejected what Cicero called kinetic pleasures.

On the contrary, in some places he even extols them: in his suicide letter he says that when he had terrible pains associated with urolithiasis, memories of meetings and conversations with friends helped him overcome these pains. If we use Cicero's dichotomy, then such pleasure can be called kinetic, and it turns out to be stronger than the absence of "static pleasure".

These inconsistencies led me to turn to other authors who expound the Epicurean doctrine. As a result, I became convinced that the dichotomy of kinetic and static pleasure is found only in Cicero and in two other texts influenced by the same doxographic tradition: Diogenes Laërtius and Athenaeus.

What did Epicurus really mean when he called the absence of suffering the highest pleasure? He did not separate this state from the process of replenishing a deficiency in the body - he did not separate satiety from food. Epicurus simply wanted to say that the extent of our pleasure from food is determined by our satiety, and not by what exactly we eat. We will receive equal pleasure from ordinary bread and from luxurious dishes.

The limit of pleasure is satiety - this was the teaching of Epicurus. He disputed Plato's thesis, according to which we receive pleasure only in the process of, for example,

eating, and therefore, if pleasure is a good, then a person striving for pleasure must constantly provoke hunger in himself.

Epicurus saw that satiety is also a part of pleasure, and that pleasure is not limited to the process of replenishment.

However, academic doxography aimed to contrast the Epicureans with another hedonistic school, the Cyrenaics. And the academics applied here the very same classification principle I mentioned: thesis - antithesis. They attributed to the Cyrenaics, who strove for momentary pleasures, a devotion to kinetic pleasure, and called Epicurus an admirer of static pleasure. In the very opposition of movement and rest, of course, a Platonic dichotomy is revealed, which is not at all characteristic of either the Epicureans or the Cyrenaics. In fact, everything was much simpler. Epicurus did not preach insensitivity, not static pleasure in rest. The main thing he wanted to say is that we can experience the greatest pleasure and the greatest joy from the smallest things, therefore pleasure is available to everyone.

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