

# Propositional Logic, Truth Tables, and Epicurus' Objection to "Dialectic"

Post by "Cassius" of September 22, 2021 at 8:18 AM

Another point as to the significance of what we are talking about:

It seems to me that a good case can be made that Plato's entire form of argument is encompassed within this term of "dialectic." Epicurus was objecting not just to conclusions, but to the entire "logic-based" approach.

So for example we have Plato's [Philebus](#), which is one of the primary Platonic dialogues arguing against the view that [pleasure is the guide of life](#). We have dialectical exchanges such as this:

Quote

**SOCRATES: *Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?***

**PHILEBUS:** *They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.*

**SOCRATES:** *Nor would pain, [Philebus](#), be perfectly evil. And therefore the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good. But now — admitting, if you like, that pleasure is of the nature of the infinite — in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and [Philebus](#), can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind? And let us be careful, for I think that the danger will be very serious if we err on this point.*

**PHILEBUS:** *You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.*

**SOCRATES:** *And you, my friend, are also magnifying your favourite goddess; but still I must beg you to answer the question.*

**SOCRATES:** *And whence comes that soul, my dear Protarchus, unless the body of the universe, which contains elements like those in our bodies but in every way fairer, had also a soul? Can there be another source?*

**PROTARCHUS:** *Clearly, Socrates, that is the only source.*

**SOCRATES:** *Why, yes, Protarchus; for surely we cannot imagine that of the four classes, the finite, the infinite, the composition of the two, and the cause, the fourth, which enters into all things, giving to our bodies souls, and the art of self-management, and of*

*healing disease, and operating in other ways to heal and organize, having too all the attributes of wisdom; — we cannot, I say, imagine that whereas the self-same elements exist, both in the entire heaven and in great provinces of the heaven, only fairer and purer, this last should not also in that higher sphere have designed the noblest and fairest things?*

*PROTARCHUS: Such a supposition is quite unreasonable.*

*SOCRATES: Then if this be denied, should we not be wise in adopting the other view and maintaining that there is in the universe a mighty infinite and **an adequate limit**, of which we have often spoken, as well as a presiding cause of no mean power, which orders and arranges years and seasons and months, and may be justly called wisdom and mind?*

*PROTARCHUS: Most justly.*

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So what I have argued before, and will still argue, is that an argument against Pleasure as the goal such as this needs to be approached on two levels:

(1) You can point out that these propositional classes that Plato is throwing around - here, (1)"those things that have a limit," and (2) "those things that do not have a limit" in that there can always be more or less of them - have to be tied to reality in order for them to have any significance to us. "Tying them to reality" means verifying them through the canonical faculties (senses, passions, anticipations). That's a general way that you can respond to any propositional reasoning, by diving into the definitions and questioning those.

(2) You can opt out of this entire line of reasoning by taking the position cited by Torquatus: "This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

So arguably Epicurus is telling people not even to engage in propositional logic of the dialectical sort given its propensity to be confusing and easily tending toward manipulation in the hands of

skillful people (like Plato).

But I don't think Epicurus relied solely on "don't do dialectical argument." Just like we did in Martin's presentation, it is readily possible - for those who are so inclined - to dig into the premises and point out that the propositions are not consistent with reality. You can then restructure the propositional formulas into forms which more accurately approximate reality. But even there you have to keep in mind that it will only be an approximation of reality, and no matter how strong your formulation may appear, it will never be universally applicable to all people at all places and at all times. The entire structure of propositional logic is itself limited in what it can do, and that always has to be kept in mind or you'll get seduced by the apparent power of the propositional forms.

(More or my cites on this issue are here: [The Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure Model](#) )