

Gorgias - The Leaky Cask Hypothetical

Post by "Cassius" of September 24, 2016 at 3:07 PM

[Cassius Amicus](#)

[September 20 at 10:32am](#)

THE LEAKY CASK HYPOTHETICAL: In Gorgias, Socrates sets up the following hypo by which he seeks to prove that the better life is one without desire. Callicles disagrees, but Socrates slants the arguments in his own favor by disparaging pleasure as "scratching an itch" and the like. I think it would be helpful to discuss: "What else should Callicles have explained, and what presumptions of Socrates should he have rejected, in order to show that Socrates' analogy is ineffective as an argument against pleasure? Would it have been helpful for Callicles to have said: "But honey and wine aren't the kind of pleasures we are talking about Socrates, pleasure is the absence of pain, so we restrain our desires and we don't fill our casks with anything!" Would that have been a helpful answer? 😊

SOCRATES: Well, I will tell you another image, which comes out of the same school:—Let me request you to consider how far you would accept this as an account of the two lives of the temperate and intemperate in a figure:—There are two men, both of whom have a number of casks; the one man has his casks sound and full, one of wine, another of honey, and a third of milk, besides others filled with other liquids, and the streams which fill them are few and scanty, and he can only obtain them with a great deal of toil and difficulty; but when his casks are once filled he has no need to feed them any more, and has no further trouble with them or care about them. The other, in like manner, can procure streams, though not without difficulty; but his vessels are leaky and unsound, and night and day he is compelled to be filling them, and if he pauses for a moment, he is in an agony of pain. Such are their respective lives:—And now would you say that the life of the intemperate is happier than that of the temperate? Do I not convince you that the opposite is the truth?

CALLICLES: You do not convince me, Socrates, for the one who has filled himself has no longer any pleasure left; and this, as I was just now saying, is the life of a stone: he has neither joy nor sorrow after he is once filled; but the pleasure depends on the superabundance of the influx.

SOCRATES: But the more you pour in, the greater the waste; and the holes must be large for the liquid to escape.

CALLICLES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: The life which you are now depicting is not that of a dead man, or of a stone, but of a cormorant; you mean that he is to be hungering and eating?

CALLICLES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And he is to be thirsting and drinking?

CALLICLES: Yes, that is what I mean; he is to have all his desires about him, and to be able to live happily in the gratification of them.

SOCRATES: Capital, excellent; go on as you have begun, and have no shame; I, too, must disencumber myself of shame: and first, will you tell me whether you include itching and scratching, provided you have enough of them and pass your life in scratching, in your notion of happiness?

[Cassius Amicus](#) It seems to be a common technique that the best way to attack "pleasure" is to talk as if pleasure="scratching your nose" or the like, and to contrast it with something high-brow like "reading literature" so as to imply that pleasure is always embarrassing and high-brow is always admirable. But this hides the fact that the reason we pursue the highbrow (art, etc) is the pleasure that it gives us, not because there is something "good" about it in itself.

And so the attack frequently turns to dividing "good pleasures" against "bad pleasures," and in order to know the difference you have to have some standard other than pleasure itself. So THAT standard becomes the highest good.

So anytime there is discussion of "good pleasures" and "bad pleasures" you can bet that pleasure in general is going to come out the loser.

[Cassius Amicus](#) Also "but when his casks are once filled he has no need to feed them any more, and has no further trouble with them or care about them." This obscures the question of why the person filled them in the first place - as if "god told him too" or something was the cause. But the question is "why were the casks filled in the first place" and "to what use are the contents of the cask being employed"?

No wonder these guys are so fond of "infinite indivisibility." Their favorite technique is to apply artificial/abstract divisions and then act as if those divisions were handed down by god, or exist in themselves, and then those divisions become more important than the reality that is being divided.

If you give into the suggestion that the artificial divisions have a reality in themselves then the dialectical game is lost.

[Cassius Amicus](#) "- moderation in all things is the true way to happiness. " No I would politely but strongly disagree! The issue of investigating the "greatest good" makes some degree of sense in that we are looking for the standard by which to guide our lives. If there is one contestant for that standard that miserably fails in every respect, it is "moderation" because that never gives you any idea of the direction you want to go - it just advises us to stay in the middle and never take a position on anything being better than anything else. We frequently see "moderation" cited here as a proper goal but I see nothing in Epicurus that sanctions that and much that opposes it. Once we decide what the guide/goal is, in my view we should use very bit of our strength to achieve it.

[Cassius Amicus](#) I think that's the point, Michael, that Socrates is making in saying that whatever our goal is, it must have limit, because if you can't achieve it then your life will be constant frustration. So therefore it is important to decide how to meet the objection. One way to set a goal that can be met is to drastically limit one's goal to pure survival, and then one can be happy that one is surviving. That's essentially what the Stoics advise, but is that what Epicurus advised? A thousand times no! "[VS63](#). There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance."

So the argument is an important one, and it demands a response, and Epicurus gave it in the form of the limit of pleasure being the elimination of all pain. But by sleight of hand ("absence of pain is all you need to know!") our Stoic friends turn Epicurus' answer into the elimination of pleasure itself!

RW [VS63](#) there doesn't sound too different from "moderation in all things". What am I missing?

[Cassius Amicus](#) NO! 😏 Why does one shoot for the middle? Why would one shoot for any less pleasure than is available without an undue penalty in pain? Everyone's circumstances are going to be different, and the amount of pleasure they can reach is going to be di...[See More](#)
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[Cassius Amicus](#) Ronald Warrick I would appreciate any further comments you have that would help us all get a handle on the issue of the "limit of pleasure." I very much want to improve my description of this issue because I believe it is so important to what Epicurus discussed and why he said it. I agree totally that the issue seems very unimportant (at least to us today) and therefore it is confusing at best to discuss it.

But apparently the ancient Greeks thought that it was a killer argument to say "the greatest good must have an upper limit / be achievable in full / be measurable as complete / be pure / be full." And if you step back and put yourself in this world where syllogisms and formulas are everything, and words can become almost sacred in meaning, then the argument can make some sense. After all, if you want to say that a thing is "the highest" or "the best" then you can never admit that something else could be "higher" or "better." And so your highest and best therefore has to be defined as a quantity (complete) or a quality (pure) which cannot be improved.

Plato and his Stoic descendants therefore took the position that words like "moral worth" and "virtue" are complete in themselves, and got comfortable with it, just like we are comfortable in saying a "full glass of water" can't hold anything else.

And so any philosophical school which was going to oppose Plato and the Stoics, and which wanted to argue that "Pleasure" and not "virtue" or "moral worth" as the goal, had to show that pleasure does indeed have this quality of having a "limit" beyond which nothing could be higher or better. So how does Epicurus answer them? By using the flask / leaky flask analogy to illustrate that a life of pleasure does indeed have a point of fullness / completeness / highest capacity and purity. And that point is reached not by draining the flask until it is empty of pleasure (asceticism) nor by constantly pouring in new pleasures once the flask is full (that would be wasteful).

So this analogy / illustration answers the Platonists by providing a description of the goal of life which does "have a limit." I am beginning to detest that word "limit" because it has so many connotations in English that are negative, but we can also use more positive terms like "fullness" or "completeness" to show that the analogy makes a lot of sense.

And to repeat once more, if the goal is a flask full of pleasure that is not leaking and does not need replenishing, then your goal is not to seek "moderation" (fill the flask half full???) but to intelligently choose ones actions so that the flask does indeed become full of pleasure, (physical and mental pleasures as we ordinarily understand the word), which has been obtained without creating conditions of undue pain or expectation of pain. That's where Torquatus correctly emphasizes that:

"The Ends of Goods and Evils themselves, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake; ***where people go wrong is in not knowing what things are productive of pleasure and pain.***" All pleasure is desirable and all pain is undesirable, so actions have to be chosen solely on the criteria of what those actions produce. Sometimes "moderation" may in fact be the proper choice, but often choosing "the middle" is of no logical relationship at all to the desired goal of filling the flask with pleasure while eliminating pain or at least keeping it to a minimum.

This issue divides fans of Epicurus probably more than any other. Any illustrations, charts, diagrams, analogies, etc that we can use to make it more clear would be tremendously helpful.

[Cassius Amicus](#) Presuming "you" refers to me, Michael Stibbs, it is Plato who is trying to reduce the argument against pleasure to a formula, and Epicurus who realized that there was a need to be able to refute the argument. Torquatus: "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."

I fully agree with Epicurus that an elaborate argument is not necessary, but the circumstances of the world are that the Platonic approach has been entrenched for 2000 years, and those who are trained in these issues are taught that the Platonic "limits" argument is correct, so it must be answered, just as Epicurus did.

What's worse than that is that Epicurus' explanation, tailored to show the fallacy of the Platonic approach, has been taken out of that context and twisted into an argument for asceticism (absence of pain as the statement of the goal). A seemingly logical but out of context interpretation now undermines the whole Epicurean approach. The only way to undo the damage, prevent the twisting, and move things back in the right direction is to dig back into the context of 300BC to understand why things were said in the way they were.

[MS](#) Yes I agree. Its very hard though to step away from the formulaistic approach which we have all been taught to think in. But what do I know? I am just a humble lawyer. Plato I found fascinating as a boy because I was looking for rational certainties. As I grew older I realised that such certainties are just as much a myth as the divinities of the ancient world.

[Elli Pensa](#)

hi! I wonder how someone could find rational certainties in Plato, when Plato is famous that he based the most of his works on myths ? And I also wonder why all the ancient greek world is reflected only to Plato ? If there was a possibility to be taught in school for Epicurus and his philosophy, won't someone find some of the same certainties you were looking for ? Thanks !

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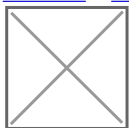


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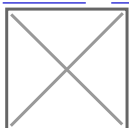


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