

Pleasure, Desire and Limits

Post by "Godfrey" of July 20, 2022 at 2:02 AM

First off, I would throw out Torquatus in this instance because, at least for me, this is the heart of Cicero's attempt to discredit Epicurus. He's over-complicating pleasure and over-simplifying desire.

All of the nuance is in Epicurus' writings. He's the one who brings up limits. The problem that arises with Cicero is that the feelings aren't adequate to create a personal value system: they're reactions. You can anticipate how you might feel, and that is integral to choosing and avoiding, but it's a piecemeal approach to ethics and Cicero and others have a field day with that.

Effective ethics aren't created piecemeal. But as Epicurus clearly shows, they're not handed down from above (any "above"). I'm thinking that the categories of desires are a framework that we each use to create our own ethical system. Epicurus, as I think was pointed out in the podcast recently, wasn't a dogmatist: he was teaching us how to think. And this is another example of him doing so. We each, in our given situation, are given this tool to categorize and prioritize what is important to us.

As for limits.... As I currently understand it, the natural and necessary desires are the basics. We need these to survive. It's pretty confusing from the remaining texts of Epicurus (and Cicero doesn't add anything useful here as far as I can tell) what the difference is between natural/unnecessary and unnatural (or unnatural/unnecessary). So to reason it out, how can we differentiate these two?

The natural relationship between pleasure and pain is that they limit each other. This is how we reach homeostasis: too much pleasure leads to pain, which we limit through pleasure, and so on in a continuous cycle. As for what is unnatural: we know the limit of pleasure from [PD03](#), but [PD11](#) points out that we need to know the limits of pains and desires. The physical limits of pains are spelled out in [PD04](#), but what are the mental limits? The natural limit of pain is through pleasure. But we humans have a unique ability to give ourselves unlimited mental pain, and this breaks the natural cycle of homeostasis and can be considered unnatural. This is probably where addiction lies, and addiction is now understood (correct me if I'm wrong) as desire run amok. If we've gotten to this point, we've broken the natural limit of pain and desire and must self-limit or find other means to limit such as hospitalization, rehab, having oneself tied to a mast and so forth.

To be in the "sweet spot" of a pleasurable life we must have our basic needs (natural and necessary desires) met, and we must know our personal unnatural desires. The pain from unnatural desires is just a result, to avoid that pain we have to understand and limit our desires. Then, when our basic needs are met and we are free from unnatural desires, we can

embrace the natural and unnecessary desires as we like, and experience all variety of pleasures. So maybe Cicero got this part right when he described the perfect life of pleasure; he just neglected to put it in the proper context. Or he couldn't reason it out.