

Differences between Epicureanism and Cyrenaicism

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 1, 2022 at 9:02 AM

This also by Jordan Crago:

Quote

...Aristippus prided himself on his mastery over the pleasures he indulged, ensuring that he never made the mistake of believing a particular source of pleasure to be essential to his happiness, which allowed him to forego it if needed. For example, Aristippus said that he possessed the infamous courtesan Laïs, but that he was not possessed by her, and that “what is best is not abstaining from pleasures, but instead controlling them without being controlled.” This ability to indulge pleasure but also forego it, for example, if it will ultimately bring you greater pain in its wake, brought Aristippus a sense of freedom and self-mastery.

Like later Cyrenaics, Aristippus held that bodily pleasure was greater than mental pleasure. This seems plausible, for who would argue that the memory of fine food rivals the eating of fine food in enjoyment? Nevertheless, Aristippus put great stock by the avoidance of mental suffering. Indeed, part of Aristippus’ teaching on never becoming dependent on a particular source of pleasure, which is to say, seeing them as essential to your happiness, has to do with avoiding the distress you would feel if you lost that pleasure.

...The next Cyrenaic virtue I’ll discuss is temperance, which Aristippus defines as disdaining excess. The following letter written by Aristippus to his daughter illustrates Cyrenaic temperance. He is advising his daughter on how to react to the local government threatening to seize her properties: “I instruct you to manage this business with the rulers in such a way that my advice benefits you. That advice was not to desire what is excessive. In this way you’ll live out your life in the best fashion, if you’re disdainful of every excess. Those men will never wrong you so much that you’ll be in want, since you still have the two orchards, and they suffice even for a luxurious life. Even if only the property in Berenice were left, it wouldn’t fail to support an excellent lifestyle.”

Aristippus reminds his daughter that although she will lose some land, she will still have some left, and what remains is sufficient for a luxurious lifestyle. Now, for those of us who own no property, this anecdote isn’t enormously relatable. However, Aristippus does insist that “Those men will never wrong you so much that you’ll be in want”, which implies that even if the government seized all her properties, rather than just

some, she would still have enough to be happy.

What Aristippus is implying, I think, is that although luxuries add spice to happiness, they are not ultimately essential to it. Another anecdote supports this idea: "Since you share this pleasant lifestyle with those women, let the officials in Cyrene wrong you as much as they want: they won't wrong you with respect to your natural end". This reminds me very much of Epicureanism, which is unsurprising since Epicurus was so influenced by the Cyrenaics.

In particular, I'm reminded of the Epicurean distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires. Some desires are necessary to the pleasant life, for example, one's basic bio-psychological needs (food, water, shelter, friends), but others are unnecessary to the pleasant life, i.e. desires for luxuries. For Epicurus as for Aristippus, I suggest, luxuries add variety to the pleasant life, but one could still live pleasantly without them. The difference being, of course, that Epicurus taught voluntary asceticism from luxuries, whereas Aristippus taught controlled indulgence of them.

Thus, we might say that to desire excess is to desire what you cannot have. The importance of disdaining excess lay in the danger of undermining enjoyment in what you have available to you by replacing it with unhappy longing and toiling for what you don't have, which is hedonistically irrational. Disdaining excess, then, offers an antidote to the unnecessary unhappiness of those who have everything they need to be happy — basic needs and, for most people, a ton of luxuries to boot — but who nevertheless make themselves unhappy by desiring what can't be had.

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Just adding this in here, as it has some usefulness. And to further see how this is beneficial:

When a particular thing that we want is very difficult or impossible to get or we have lost something that we thought was very pleasurable and can no longer get it, then we may feel angry or sad (and also may begin to feel feelings of hopelessness) -- then we need to survey the situation and see some important truths about happiness -- that our own happiness doesn't depend on just one thing -- happiness comes from multiple sources. So we can then stop "knocking our head against a wall" with regard to a certain thing that we want and can't get -- and not be so uptight about it. Further down the line we may decide that it is still something to put effort into achieving, and we can go about it clear-headed. Or we may simply see that we really don't need that thing as much as we thought we did, and so creatively pursue other enjoyments in life.

I think it is important to remember that this isn't the easiest to impliment -- there may be a feeling of internal resistance (I want what I want, no matter what!). But unlike Buddhism (which appears to me to teach "letting go, doing nothing, and having no further desires") I see this as different in that we are active and seek out new pleasure and enjoyments to replace what we

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can't have or have lost. So the emphasis is on personal responsibility and freedom -- making choices and taking actions that lead to enjoyment and happiness.