

Episode One Hundred Thirty Eight - Letter to Menoecus 5 - Pleasure Part One

Post by “reneliza” of September 7, 2022 at 7:52 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Quote

From that table above, desire (epithymia) is a feeling of something that results in some pleasure. The opposite of desire is fear (phobos) which appears to be a feeling repelling against something that leads to pain.

I'm not sure I can get on board with the underlined part above. Lucian opposes fear to *hope*, which I think is nearer the mark;

Quote

And from this point, as Thucydides might say, the war takes its beginning. These ambitious scoundrels were quite devoid of scruples, and they had now joined forces; it could not escape their penetration that human life is under the absolute dominion of two mighty principles, fear and hope (ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου) and that anyone who can make these serve his ends may be sure of a rapid fortune.

Which drives me on to my next (tentative) conclusion--that fear and hope are both *kinds* of desire. Desire is everything that happens when you see things as they are, and wish that they were different. When unscrupulous scoundrels prey on hope and fear, they prey on desire.

And now for the tricky part--if I defend my thesis that desire presents as a feeling of pain, how do I avoid the path that Cassius is rightly concerned about? In truth I don't think there's a real problem here, because I don't think that pain is necessarily "bad" or "evil". If I lean against a hot stove, I ought to be thankful that nature has furnished a biological alarm system warning me to move quickly, or risk serious injury. Rocks and gods and corpses can get by without pain, but not me--I need pain in order to go on living. Some rare people don't experience pain, and are at high risk for an early or sudden death;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congenital_insensitivity_to_pain

Quote

Congenital insensitivity to pain (CIP), also known as congenital analgesia, is one or more extraordinarily rare conditions in which a person cannot feel (and has never felt) physical pain.[1] The conditions described here are separate from the HSAN group of disorders, which have more specific signs and cause. Because feeling physical pain is vital for survival, CIP is an extremely dangerous condition.[1] It is common for people with the condition to die in childhood due to injuries or illnesses going unnoticed.[1][2] Burn injuries are among the more common injuries.

So I don't want to lose the sensation of pain. I also very generally don't want to *experience* the sensation of pain--it's necessary, and very natural, but it doesn't feel good--I'd rather experience continuous pleasure.

I think it's like that with desire. I understand that I have a 2 or 3 pound mammalian brain, and that, having that, I am driven almost constantly by the desire for things that are likewise desired by nearly all other mammals--the desire for food, water, shelter, warmth, sex, rest, etc. In addition to these are the particularly human desires, cultivated by things like community engagement, culture, society, economics, etc.

I cannot fulfill all of my desires. Moreover, Epicurus recognized a tendency in us to develop new desires when we have worn out or satisfied the old ones. If desire *is* a kind of pain, as I argue, and if I cannot fulfill *all* of my desires, the question naturally arises as to what I should do about them. It is by no means obvious or self-evident that, because desire is a kind of pain, the only thing left to do is to spurn desire, suppress it, condemn it, or bury it in a hole. I have basically four options; I can try to fulfill them all, and inevitably fail. I can spit contempt on them all, and probably end up dead sooner than later. I can proceed more or less reactively and without a plan, satisfying the easy desires as they pass and seldom reaching far for the difficult ones. Or I can develop and establish a plan of choice and avoidance, with the goal of maximizing pleasurable outcomes over the course of a whole human life. Some desires will have to be put by; some will have to be vigorously rejected; some will be indulged for the sake of pleasure, and some other few will be made into something like a life's ambition--the desire which, well-chosen, will become the theme of a life well-lived.

Can we expect such an outcome from desire, if desire is a kind of pain? Why not? Pain is not nature's moral or judicial punishment--pain, like pleasure, is one of nature's guide-posts. Desire and pain direct us toward lives of pleasure and remembrance--the happy memory of all that we have come to enjoy in our lives. If there is an opposite to desire, then let that be it.

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This is a really interesting topic and basically I agree with everything Joshua says here. I think "desire" must be a lack of something good (or at least something I perceive as good), and given that we're using pretty broad definitions of "pleasure" and "pain" here, that any lack must be a pain.

Hunger is a desire for food, and I think it is clearly a pain, even though it's one so easily satisfied for me that I rarely get to the point of actually registering the lack as pain.

I am interested to look more into the neuro side of things though. There is some neurological overlap between the experience of physical and emotional pain (and of course emotional pain can be manifested as physical symptoms) but I'm not sure how desire might register. I would also expect hope to be entirely different, but I'm interested to see if any studies have been done looking into any of these things

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said that all emotions derive from fear and love. I'm wondering if gratitude might be an inverse of fear. Instead of pain from worrying about how things are, it's a pleasure from appreciating how things are.

Also I just saw there's a few more pages so sorry if I'm repeating others!