

John Stuart Mill on Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of September 12, 2022 at 3:26 PM

Thank you Martin! I read so far the first half of Chapter 2 from your link. There is a lot to like in it but I am taken aback by this following section. It is not entirely clear to me how to read this. Maybe in the end it does acknowledge that the ranking is individually subjective. But it sure looks like he is saying we can add up the opinions of the greater number of people and from that "majority vote" attain (he even uses the word "suffrage") what amounts to an objective decision - at least one that is considered as such. Hopefully there is more that makes clear that this is not his conclusion, but the attribution to the utilitarians the term "greatest good of the greatest number" sounds like it may apply here too.

Maybe he explains somewhere why (social concerns?) he reaches such a conclusion. Or better yet, maybe he backs away from this later.... I understand that Aristotle suggested that we look to the majority of leading citizens for our standard of ethics, but I know nothing in Epicurus which indicates that rankings of pleasure and pain could or should be decided by the greatest number of people. Maybe this is the kind of "practical" thing that one is "forced" to do when someone tries to develop a system of government among people of widely varying natures, but it sure does not strike me as philosophically defensible or accurate to "the truth" of the way real people actually feel.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.