

Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy - 5 - Would An Epicurean Accept The "Brain In A Vat Producing Perfect Pleasure" Hypothetical?

Post by "Cassius" of March 11, 2017 at 4:13 PM

[Cassius Amicus](#)

[March 7 at 7:05pm](#)

****Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy**** (5) The following thought-experiment was actually suggested to me by an Epicurean friend... What if there was a machine which could provide you with perfect pleasure. (Modern Epicureans seem to define "pleasure" in several different ways but just insert your definition here.) But it meant spending your life as a brain in a vat, i.e., in a way that many people's conventional moral intuitions would find troubling. Let's suppose there's no risk attached to this procedure -- it's pretty much guaranteed. Some Epicureans have told me that's fine and their doctrines would lead them to accept the procedure, and become a brain in a pleasure vat. I think other Epicureans would feel a conflict, once again, though.

You could optionally add another criterion (version 2, let's call it) and make it that the procedure will half your IQ and reduce you to stupidity and a dreamlike state, but one in which you'll feel pleasure and contentment but lose all wisdom and intelligence.

Some people may say that pleasure would only be worthwhile insofar as it's accompanied by something like wisdom or intelligence. Seneca points out that would mean pleasure is no longer the supreme good, though, but wisdom has supplanted it as more important, or at least a composite of them has become the supreme good. As Seneca points out, the Stoics value wisdom as the supreme good, upon which they claim joy and happiness are likely to supervene. So if that's what you want, that's actually more akin to the Stoic definition of the goal of life. Whereas the Epicureans, by contrast, generally appear to make wisdom of subordinate value to pleasure.

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[Michael Carteron](#) Epicureans say it is impossible to live pleasantly without living wisely. Again, how much does he know of the philosophy?

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[Cassius Amicus](#) (1) Hypotheticals which are based on non-nonsensical physics are generally non-starters. Epicurean ethics are based on the physics of the real world and of real human beings. If we want to talk about ethics in a fantasy world then some might find that to be an interesting game, but the main use of that game for practical people is to illustrate why it is important to stay grounded in the facts of reality lest you waste your time on false dreams.

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[Jason Baker](#) Thought experiments...

I'm going to go join the Stoic group and post Trolley Memes all day long.

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Hypotheticals have very poor predictive ability in judging future decision making processes or current values particularly when there are systematic biases built into them. This has shown to be true over and over again in the neurosciences.

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We care about science, right?

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[Hiram Crespo](#) Polystratus said that when people pursue virtue without the study of nature, their virtue comes to nothing (they either become superstitious or arrogant). The same might be said of pleasure, if we consider PD 5. We've talked here in the past about how Epicurean philosophy is meant to reconcile us with nature (and with reality), to help us keep our feet on the ground, and of how Epicurean philosophy is an attempt to be both authentic (no need to deny science and nature) and happy. Not sure how a pleasure machine would comply with that, since it produces "Platonic" or imaginary pleasure.

There's nothing wrong with imagining things, as an exercise maybe. But to replace reality in this manner is neurosis.

But let's give this a try. If we take this hypothesis more or less into the real world, maybe we can consider the stupor of drug use. If a person tries to operate in a constant state of stupor as a result of drug use, he may lose his reputation and his job, and be unable to meet his most important natural and necessary desires. He may also harm his relations. There are also potential legal disadvantages if the drugs he uses are illegal.

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