

Slider models of pleasure vs. pain

Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2023 at 3:36 PM

as to Martin's comment

Quote

Regarding Comment #2, attributing pleasure and pain to sub-pleasures and sub-pains is an auxiliary construction which may help understanding. However, it is the total effect of external and inner sensations which creates the feeling of pleasure/pain. There are no intermediate subsystems which have their own feelings of pleasure/pain.

The reference to "intermediate subsystems" seems to me to be related to the issues raised by Chrysippus' "hand question." Atoms don't feel pleasure and pain, and it's not at all clear that we would say that individual cells do - it takes more organization and up the system before pain and pleasure register. By the time you get to a hand it definitely feels pleasure and pain, but so do lots of other parts of the body at the same time, and you have to consider as Martin says "the total effect."

I think it would be excellent to set as a goal for both the book review and the forum to turn that example cited by Torquatus inside out until we are comfortable that we completely understand what is meant by Chryssipus' argument and why it is wrong.

We've left it floating out there ambiguously far too long, and I think the source Cicero was borrowing from to write Torquatus was right to think that it is an example that is critical to understand so we can overcome the Stoic argument.

"Pleasure" does not only refer to overt active stimulation. The act of experiencing any part of life without pain should be considered to be an act of experiencing pleasure. That's the only way the logic-chopping arguments against Epicurus and pleasure can be defeated. Anytime "absence of pain" is stated we should immediately infer and treat it the same as if "presence of pleasure" had been stated.

And the difficulties in making that point clear would appear to be why Chrysippis used the argument and Torquatus brings it up to ridicule it. Leaving the issue ambiguous leads to all sorts of difficulties. People normally don't refer to absence of pain as a pleasure, and those who don't know Epicurus' philosophical context think is wording is ridiculous or that he is saying something mysterious. Worse, it opens the door to argue that "absence of pain" really means "tranquility," which improperly elevates tranquility to something more than simply one among many important pleasures. And that improper elevation makes it easy to think that tranquility is all we need, that tranquility is outside of and higher than pleasure itself, and that we don't really need or want pleasure at all. Stoics and Buddhists and all sorts of other "spiritualists" jump all over this to make Epicurus seem like one of them.

Saying that the goal is to rid one's experience from pains is exactly the same thing as saying that the goal is filling one's experience with pleasures.

And that's the same as saying that the goal of "Absence of Pain" is exactly the same as the goal of "Presence of Pleasure."

And that equivalence is why - and only why - it is appropriate to say that "the greatest pleasure" is "the absence of pain." As [PD03](#) says, "the limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once."

All this works because we have ascertained that there's no true middle ground between pleasure and pain. Once we've ascertained that, we can see that it's totally inappropriate to think that this middle ground (which does not exist) is "tranquility." But that's exactly the incorrect deduction that a lot of people (especially those of Buddhist or Stoic bent) are reading into Epicurus.

Again, the cite:

Quote from Torquatus from On Ends

"[38] Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."

"[39] But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: *Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good.* My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the

state of pleasure."

That's the Reid translation and it's worth emphasizing the final line:

"Anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure."

Any full presentation of Epicurean philosophy has to incorporate the issue being discussed here. Chrysippus and his Stoics may have made this confusion worse through their arguments, but we can use the fact that Cicero / Torquatus preserved those arguments to illustrate why they are wrong and what Epicurus really meant.