

How would you respond to an existentialist who says "You Epicureans have chosen pleasure as your meaning but it's not universal" do Epicureans hold that pleasure is the universal Good?

Post by "Cassius" of June 13, 2023 at 11:14 AM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

We just don't have the freedom to choose to act on something other than what we consider most pleasant.

That reminds me of this from Chapter 14 of A Few Days In Athens:

[Quote from Frances Wright / A Few Days In Athens](#)

"Does the human mind possess the power to believe or disbelieve, at pleasure, any truths whatsoever?"

"I am not prepared to answer: but I think it does, since it possesses always the power of investigation."

"But, possibly, not the will to exercise the power. Take care lest I beat you with your own weapons. I thought this very investigation appeared to you a crime."

"Your logic is too subtle," said the youth, "for my inexperience."

"Say rather, my reasoning too close. Did I bear you down with sounding words and weighty authorities, and confound your understanding with hair-drawn distinctions, you would be right to retreat from the battery."

"I have nothing to object to the fairness of your deductions," said Theon, "But would not the doctrine be dangerous that should establish our inability to help our belief; and might we not stretch the principle, until we asserted our inability to help our actions?"

"We might, and with reason. But we will not now traverse the ethical *pons asinorum* of necessity — the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers. You inquire if the doctrine we have essayed to establish, be not dangerous. I reply — not, if it be true. Nothing is so dangerous as error, — nothing so safe as truth. A dangerous truth would be a contradiction in terms,

and an anomaly in things.”

“But what is a truth?” said Theon.

“It is pertinently asked. A truth I consider to be an ascertained fact; which truth would be changed into an error, the moment the fact, on which it rested, was disproved.”

“I see, then, no fixed basis for truth.”

“It surely has the most fixed of all — the nature of things. And it is only an imperfect insight into that nature, which occasions all our erroneous conclusions, whether in physics or morals.”

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I have to say my mind is not settled on this. I think I agree with the point that we do not have the freedom to second-guess the senses, and to find for example that sugar is not "sweet" or snow "white" just by trying to do so by willpower.

But is it correct to say that we don't have the freedom to "act" on anything other than what we consider is most pleasant?

My preliminary thought is that the feelings of pleasure and pain are like the senses, and we can't by thinking overrule the judgment of pleasure and pain. But do we not have the freedom to "act" differently than what our feelings tell us? Is that not why we sometimes choose pain rather than pleasure?

At this point, to repeat, I don't have a firm position on this, and I am irritated at Frances Wright that in my reading she is bringing up the question without answering it! 😊