PD09 - Condensed Pleasure

Post by “Elayne” of March 25, 2019 at 2:59 PM

Now, how does intensity relate to fullness of pleasure? My experience is that intensity is not required for fullness of pleasure—only the absence of pain. Depending on how the neuro research goes, this could be me saying “even one endorphin-receptor interaction, in the absence of pain, registers as pleasure”, but I think it is more likely that we need a certain threshold level of pleasurable neurotransmitter activity going on or we will have pain. This suspicion is based on research I have seen and need to dig up about people who are deficient in endocannabinoid production, who tend to have pain but without obvious cause. Our bodies are undergoing internal movement and contact with the environment, and I suspect that our basic state would be pain if we had no pleasure processes at all going on. So the better wording would be “if there is exactly enough endorphin activity going on to counteract all the pain of the body, the result is pleasure. If there is only slightly less, the result is pain. There is no in between.” If I am correct, this would be biological evidence to support what Epicurus said about the impossibility of a neutral state. My experience already agrees with him.

There is an experiential difference between a less intense but still fully pleasurable sensation and an intense one, but it does not feel like a difference in completeness/ fullness of the pleasure cup. This is something I rely on others to know from experience, since I can’t prove it. I do not consider highly intense pleasure to be more or less preferable to less intense. The reason I know this is that if I am in a state of even mildly intense pleasure, sitting with friends after a satisfying meal, I have zero desire to jump up and bike down a nearby hill to increase my pleasure. (This is similar to what the “rat park” and related human studies have found about addiction—that neither rats nor humans are interested in drug-mediated pleasure if they are in an otherwise pleasant environment. It’s not really the substance itself that creates the addictions but the underlying lack of ordinary pleasures). Nor do I want to stop mid-hill on my bike so I can go have a less intense pleasure. Anyway, I would not call intensity an increase of pleasure, but it is nevertheless at least a characteristic of pleasure that it can be more or less intense.

The next thing I would say from personal experience is that highly intense pleasure-producing stimuli can become painful if prolonged, but I suggest this is NOT related to the pleasure itself—rather, I perceive that it is related to the intensity of the stimulation and/or the intense biological response to an intense stimulus. It is hard to sort these things out as they are experienced simultaneously, but that is my proposal. Being tickled very briefly can feel pleasurable, but if it goes on and on, it is too much and is no fun—in that case, the pleasure itself vanishes and the intense stimulus persists. If the pleasure I am feeling is internal ecstasy—when I was younger, although I didn’t experiment with drugs, I experimented with some bliss-promoting meditation practices—the biological demands on my body, including my

brain, required to sustain that level of intensity can be exhausting and become uncomfortable. Even the sensation which one second ago felt blissful begins to feel like pain. However, I do not say it is the pleasure itself that causes this, but the intensity of biological response, because once a sensation becomes painful, it is not pleasurable by definition. I wonder what this would look like, at the molecular level in the brain—what changes, at that instant when a stimulus becomes painful? This type of intense pleasure can be followed by a “let-down” instead of an afterglow which I suspect is similar to coming down off an intoxicant. I found the aftermath of these meditation practices so unpleasant that I quit doing them years ago. I have wondered if internally stimulated intense pleasure can possibly have a similar effect to exogenous opiates—do the receptors down-regulate?

Another example of intensity would be pharmaceutical opiates, which bind to our endogenous receptors in a tighter manner than our own endorphins, stimulating us more intensely than we are biologically evolved to cope with, at least on an ongoing basis. In response, our bodies down-regulate the receptors, to escape the excessive stimulation. And then when the opiates are removed, that person for a time will have difficulty experiencing endogenous pleasure, because the receptors must recover first. Our bodies regulate intensity of response to a stimulus, to restore the homeostasis necessary for survival. ** I need to double check the research and add references for this section, since it is just what I remember reading.

In the psychiatric literature, an argument is made that we can have “too much pleasure” based on disorders such as mania in bipolar disease, where the extreme joy is not related to external stimuli but has become unhinged. I would say here they are really commenting on intensity, plus disconnection from reality. I think they are making an error to believe that what happens in a disease state refers to pleasure in the absence of such an illness—as if they are saying “don’t get too happy, or you might come down with bipolar mania and give away your car to a stranger in a fit of happiness.” We have no evidence to my knowledge that intense enjoyment causes bipolar disease. There are several possibilities for the cause of bipolar, one of the more interesting ones having to do with the multiple body “clocks”, various circadian rhythms, getting out of time with each other. But if intense neurotransmitter hits are unsafe for the body in some other way, the usual warning mechanism is pain. So I don’t think it is unreasonable to imagine that there is possibly a danger in highly intense/ condensed ordinarily pleasure-producing stimuli for prolonged periods, although the specifics of intensity thresholds and durations would likely vary from one individual to another, because there are a lot of genetic differences, such as at the receptor level.

I think this is important to clarify, because it is part of the fear of pleasure people have. If we can make it clear that the pleasure is not dangerous but that intense stimulation can sometimes have painful effects, we can encourage people to drop their worries that if they engage in pleasure all the time, they will be sorry later. There is still a natural limit to desire for intense stimuli, in that pain will begin when a stimulus is too intense for too long, for a given person.

There are some people who are biologically less responsive to a range of stimuli. It takes more to achieve the same internal response. These are people who like very hot pepper, sky diving, horror movies, etc. Some of them have to go very nearly to the point of escaping death on a regular basis before they are able to notice pleasure, and indeed many of them do die, such as with base jumping. Some of this can be combated by teaching them to slow down and pay attention to less intense pleasures, because it can partly be a habit—personal experience with patients. But there are actual genetic differences that seem to correlate with this as well. A lower responsiveness to stimuli can correlate with lower conscience and higher sociopathy. (** again, I need to supply references to medical literature for all these points).

The way in which I see Epicurus addressing this is simply with avoiding pleasures that bring along more pains. And that seems quite sufficient for me, but I also think that it would help reduce fears by specifically addressing stimulus/response intensity as an issue, with science-based correlates.

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