

David Sedley on The Epicurean Separation of Virtue And Pleasure

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The following observation comes from David Sedley's [Diogenes of Oenanda on Cyrenaic Hedonism](#). It provides an excellent response to people who want to argue that since Epicurus held virtue to be inseparable from the happy life, that he also held that virtue is desirable for itself.

offspring. Wisdom teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living wisely and honourably and justly, nor to live wisely and honourably and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues and living pleasantly belong naturally together, and living pleasantly is inseparable from the virtues.

From texts like these, Julia Annas has gone so far as to maintain that the Epicurean position on virtue is not instrumentalist at all. Rather, she argues (comparing Mill), virtue becomes *part* of the Epicurean pleasant life, and thus desirable for its own sake.⁸ This reading unfortunately requires her to dismiss a number of Epicurean texts – among them Diogenes of Oenoanda fr. 32 Smith – which insist that virtue has purely instrumental value and is never desirable for its own sake. And there is in any case something worrying about the reasoning. The only way I can see to understand Annas' interpretation is in terms of the following syllogism:

Living pleasantly is intrinsically desirable.
But living pleasantly is identical with living virtuously.
Therefore living virtuously is intrinsically desirable.

If this is what she means, the inference is surely fallacious. The predicate '... is intrinsically desirable' marks an intentional context, in which, as we now recognise, equivalent terms cannot always be substituted for each other *salva veritate*. To put the point a different way, the mere fact that x is identical with y does not rule out the possibility that one wants to have x for the sake of having y, and not vice versa. For example, suppose we agree that money is *both* the major cause of human unhappiness *and* the basis of survival in the modern world. Despite this identity relation, it can still be the case that I desire to have the thing which is the major cause of human unhappiness *for the sake of* having the thing which is the basis of survival in the modern world, and not vice versa. Likewise, Epicurus is entirely justified in claiming both that living pleasantly *is* living virtuously, and that living virtuously has purely instrumental value in relation to living pleasantly.

No doubt Epicurus was no more aware of the rules about opaque-context substitutions than any other ancient thinker was, but here, as so often, his logical intuitions were sound ones. His ethical position seems to me entirely consistent on this score. The pleasant life and the virtuous life are one and the same, but when we ask what in that life *makes* it the most choiceworthy life, the answer is not the virtue *per se* but the resultant pleasure.

The inseparability of virtue from pleasure, on which Epicurus insisted, lies rather in the fact that the virtues, properly understood, are the skills of pleasure management, both short term and long term. Crucially, *present* pleasure can be derived from one's confident expectations about future pleasure. Thus if courage, justice and the other virtues are outlooks which exclude all fear of future pain and free you to look forward confidently to future pleasure, their very possession becomes pleasurable.