

# Consequentialism & Moral Relativism within the context of Pleasure-filled Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2020 at 12:44 PM

Ok now I am back. We could start with all the statements in the letter to Menoeceus about "pleasure" being the alpha and omega, but I think the place to focus at the moment is on the point that feeling is the ultimate guide, beyond which there is no other, and nothing else to make a thing worth choosing and avoiding. I like to look to two places for this explanation:

(1) PD2: "2. [Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us." This is a statement that nothing which is no a subject of sensation is of any relevance to us. That would take out of the argument any abstraction which does not ultimately resolve back to a positive or negative sensation, which means pleasure and pain. I do not believe there is any more fundamental proposition in Epicurean philosophy, even PD1 as to the nature of the gods, than this one that all good and evil comes to us through sensation, which I believe translates into "feeling" in the context in which we are discussing things. If a thing cannot ultimately be "felt" in some way, then that thing is of no relevance to us. Even the issue of the gods in PD1 is relevant to us only because of the feelings that the issue of gods generates in our lives.

(1) The most clear explanation of this issue is in the opening of the Torquatus section in On Ends, which even hints at the objection which I think you are making, Eugenios, and indicates that some Epicureans ("some members of our school) fell away from Epicurus on this point, which I believe was fatal to Epicurean development (and DeWitt talks about the danger of this divergence too):

"We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. **These facts, be thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them.** (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for

indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) **Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?**

Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain."

For now I will focus only on the part in bold, but I included the "some members of our school" to point out how acute the danger is.

Ultimately the issue comes down to sensation (feeling of pleasure and pain, as shown by the equation of those things in the sentence structure) being the only judge that Nature gives us as to what is our guide for choice and avoidance.

Now the common objection here is that we choose unwisely at times, and we end up suffering more pain and pleasure. (That too is set out by Torquatus as the issue.) The answer to that issue is not that there is a god, or that there is an ideal form of pleasure which is always preferable to other forms of pleasure. The answer to that question is "Whether you like it or not, this is the way Nature operates, so you can choose to accept the natural order, or you can rebel against Nature and set up some other standard. If you do, good luck, because there is no god, no ideal form, and no outside sanction or authority whatsoever for your decision in doing that. You're on your own."

Now you Eugenios are framing the question in terms of people who are insane or "psychopathic" or "sociopathic" and asking about the apparent problems with those situations. The answer there is that NATURE has no problems with those situations whatsoever - Nature doesn't care. It's only real living people who have feelings and sensations, and it is up to them to pursue their lives with whatever circumstances they are given. Calling people psychopathic or sociopathic or using whatever terms of medicine or politics or religion or culture that we want to use as branding someone as depraved does not in any way invoke special authority from gods or Platos realms of ideals or any absolute standard of virtue whatsoever. Those people are as they are, just like cats are like cats and dogs are like dogs and rarely see things eye to eye - to the point of killing each other in many cases. That is simply the way nature operates.

Now we can as humans of course observe and recognize and take steps to deal with the consequences of those problems. We can keep rabid dogs on leashes and we can identify and restrain (restraint being another reference in Torquatus) those who would kill us either because they are in some way "-pathic" or because they just don't like the color of our skin or the way we cut our hair. If we don't act to prevent harm from those sources, then often we will suffer from that harm and pay the consequence of our failure to observe and to act.

But I am now very far downstream into the consequences. The real answer to your question is in Epicurus' **"What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"**

For those people who experience pleasure at things that we consider -pathic in some way, they are experiencing the feeling of pleasure just as we are. They are not likely to succeed at their path for very long, because the NORMAL part of the universe generally outnumbers them in any context, and the normal part is not likely to take kindly to their -pathic behavior for very long. It is correct for you to point out that ultimately they will fail to live pleasurably for very long, but you have to remember that LENGTH OF TIME is not the standard for living pleasurably. That is stated explicitly in the letter to Menoeceus a there is no reason from any other passage to infer that length of time is the overriding factor in judging pleasure. You would be right to say that "neither is intensity the overriding factor either" but the real answer is that there IS no absolute standard in Nature for how to judge pleasure. Nature is not going to smile on you because you gathered flowers in fields for 50 years instead of living for 30 years as a mountain-climber and downhill skier. There IS no absolute standard for pleasant living - no external standard at all that is sanctioned by Nature. We each get to make our own decisions as to what life will bring us the most pleasure, because only we are the ones feeling the result.

No matter how dramatically we illustrate the horrific results of what we see as depravity in the world, if you accept that Nature gives no standard other than pleasure and pain for how to live, then the result is the same, and the dramatizations may be colorful, but they all lead to the same conclusion:

10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), ***we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.***