

Comment at the Epicurean Philosophy Facebook Group On Pleasure As The Highest Good

Post by "Cassius" of September 16, 2020 at 7:17 PM

Here's a response worth preserving, and my response to that:

AT:

I do hope we can calm down those people who keep telling us that epicureans somehow prioritise short-term pleasure over long-term pleasure. I believe that deeply embedded in Epicurus' thinking is the assumption that pleasure should be measured over an entire lifetime. Therefore anything that generates pleasure now while building up pain later is not a rational choice.

Cassius:

Andy thanks for the comment. I do think your first sentence is spot on, but I am afraid we can't count on "calming down" many of those outside the group - we seem to live in a sea of people who either (1) see Epicureans as "hedonists" in the common derogatory meaning of that word, or (2) see Epicureans as proto-stoics who prize "tranquility" above pleasure. It's going to be a constant struggle to point back to the texts and point out that Epicurus held clarity to be of prime importance, so that when he used the word "pleasure" he didn't actually mean "comatose." But the "struggle" is definitely worth it as this is the kind of philosophic exchange which can be both enjoyable and productive at the same time.

Interestingly enough on your second and third sentences, I used to say exactly the same thing myself, but I am no longer thinking that "an entire lifetime" is really the precise point, unless you qualify that "entire lifetime" might be very short. It's hard to escape that conclusion due this very clear statement in the letter to Menoeceus: "(But the wise man neither seeks to escape life) nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. ***And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.***"

I think that second sentence rules out a flat preference for "length of time of pleasure" as overruling all other factors. Epicurus was pretty precise that "the most pleasant" is the way to weigh the question, rather than the longest period of time. And I think we can see the logical basis of the point if we think about it. If we consider anything that is "outside of pleasure itself, such as "noble pleasures" or "virtuous pleasures" or "longest pleasures" then we logically put ourselves in the position of needing to understand the nature of "nobility" or "virtue" or "time" and that is going to require wisdom or knowledge of those other factors in addition to pleasure.

That's the logical trap set by Plato in the [Philebus](#) which you can find by reading that dialogue. Once you admit that there is a standard by which to measure pleasure that is different from pleasure itself, you box yourself in (logically, that is) to admitting that this other factor is as important as is pleasure. Once you admit that this other factor is "as important" then Plato will show you, logically again, that what you really need is knowledge of this mystical art of judging, more so than pleasure itself.

So from a practical point of view, definitely all of us judging our own lives are going to consider how long our future pleasures will last, and how long our future pains will last, and consider that in making our judgments. But one of the reasons we are here, and one of the main ways we end up understanding Epicurus and being able to fight off the attacks of those who elevate virtue or something else to the role of "ultimate good," is to study what Epicurus was saying and see that he was both practical and an expert at logical argument.

And what he was saying is clear: the ultimate good cannot be defined "universally" in more detail than "Pleasure." It's up to each of us in our own lives to come to terms with what that means to us, and apply it accordingly. That might mean choosing to live very simply and live so as to savor every last drop of a 100+ year life. Or it might mean, if we are so inclined at age 25, to strap a rocket to our back and fly to Mars so as to experience the delight of that experience, even if we know that the price will be we'll be dead in a year.

There's no way "logically" to make that decision as a universal for everyone. Nature does do it for us; nature leaves it up to us to do it. Everyone has their own personality and their own judgment about these things, and that's why I think Epicurus phrased things the way he did, and that's why this sentence and the others quoted above are very precise and do not provide a qualifier to the word "pleasure":

"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. "