

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 16, 2020 at 9:42 PM

I agree with you I think Don, and I do see a distinction between long-term and longest time.

I also think that there is a possibility that this phrasing may be another targeted argument against Plato, and you'll recall that DeWitt discusses this as a point of contention, that Plato had argued that another reason that pleasure could not constitute the goal is that it is not always present (not continuous being the implication):

This first is from page 66

Neither was he in debt to his teachers for his hedonism. None of them was a hedonist. He was in debt to Plato for suggestions concerning the classification of desires and the calculus of advantage in pleasure,⁴⁷ but differed from both Plato and Aristippus in his definition of pleasure. To neither of these was **continuous** pleasure conceivable, because they recognized only peaks of pleasure separated either by intervals void of pleasure or by neutral states. In order to escape from these logical dead ends Epicurus worked his way to a novel division of pleasures into those that were basic and those that were decorative.⁴⁸ The pleasure of being sane and in health is basic and can be enjoyed continually. All other pleasures are superfluous and decorative. For this doctrine, once more, he was in debt to no teacher.

THE NATURAL CEILINGS OF PLEASURE

Having established body and soul upon a parity, equal partners in life, Epicurus next proceeded to propound a number of paradoxes: first, that limits of pleasure were set by Nature, beyond which no increase was possible; second, that pleasure was one and not many; and third, that **continuous** pleasure was possible. These new doctrines were the offspring of controversy, because the contrary doctrines had been sponsored by Plato and his followers, who in this instance agreed for the most part with the multitude.

The first paradox is part of Authorized Doctrine 3, and by this position its prime importance is revealed: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures." The meaning is plain if the pleasure of eating be taken as an example. Nature is the teacher, as usual, and sets the norm. Hunger is a desire of the first category according to Epicurus: it is both natural and necessary. Where this natural and necessary desire for food exists, the pleasure of satisfying it cannot

226

PLEASURE CAN BE CONTINUOUS

The apex of the new structure of ethics erected by Epicurus consists in the teaching that pleasure can be continuous. The discovery of a logical basis for this proposition was essential for the promulgation of hedonism as a practical code of conduct for mankind. No philosophy that offered merely intermittent (snatches of) pleasure would have possessed any broad or urgent appeal for those in quest of the happy life.

The predecessors of Epicurus had spent considerable thought upon the analysis of pleasure, but their attitude was in the main merely analytical and academic, lacking relevance to action. Their real was not for promoting the happiness of mankind. They were rather in the position of men who give themselves to the study of anatomy without contemplating the practice of medicine. The attitude of Epicurus, on the contrary, was pragmatic from the beginning. The declaration that "Vain is the work of that philosopher by which no malady of mankind is healed" has already been quoted.¹¹

The desired logical basis for the continuity of pleasure was afforded by the discovery of natural linkages of pleasures. From this is derived the division into basic and ornamental or superfluous pleasures, corresponding respectively to natural and necessary desires and those that are neither natural nor necessary. Hunger and thirst exemplify the

111

EPICURUS AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

former class while the desire for rich viands and rare wines belongs to the second class. Correspondingly, the satisfaction of natural hunger and thirst is a basic pleasure while the gratification of abnormal desire for rich foods and drinks is ornamental and superfluous.

So while I agree with you again that there's a logical distinction between long-term vs longest, and duration of pleasure is certainly a legitimate consideration, I think this one may be parallel in nature to "absence of pain" - it may need to be "compartmentalized" as a logical rejoinder to an anti-Pleasure argument from Plato and the usual suspects, and as a result handled carefully outside that context, so as not to overstretch its application.

I am glad you posted that because otherwise I would not have gone back and looked up these sections in DeWitt, which I remembered only vaguely.

I think I am only now after 10+ years realizing the significance of some of these sections from DeWitt, and after our discussions here and in the Lucretius podcast. I read the words here, and I thought I understood them the first time, but it's really beginning to sink in to me how DeWitt is pointing out that Epicurus was both the ultimate pragmatist, and disdainful of dialectical logic, but also at the same time he responded directly to Plato in logical terms, playing Plato's own game. I think this explains some of the difference in interpretation that I still have in discussing these things with some other people. I am going to have to be more careful to both point out the inadequacies of "logic" while at the same time point out how Epicurus uses "logic" himself, as carefully as any of the Stoics or Platonists did -- just like DeWitt observed.

And ultimately that's my best argument against the "absence of pain passages" - that they are logical points being made in the context of refuting the anti-Platonic arguments, but were never intended to represent the full picture of the nature of pleasure any more than geometry or map-making can represent true reality - they are useful for discussing aspects of reality but they aren't reality themselves. So it may be that the "continuity" issue fits in the same category.