

Against the stoics

Post by “azbcethananderson” of October 3, 2019 at 3:41 PM

In a providential universe , virtue is the sole good because providence is guiding things. So we trust things will work out for the best.

But without providence we have decide what we value , which is a challenging task. It's funny to see modern stoics stumble on this point. They can never explain why virtue is good , because they destroyed the foundation for that belief. That's why they aren't able to become a sage, there is still doubt hidden in the subconscious mind.

This is where epicurus saves the day with long term pleasure as the sole good.

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2019 at 9:19 PM

AZ -- Yes the Stoic universe presumes a providence and without one their system would fall apart, and they would have no goal - which I guess is why they insist on Providence.

As to "long term pleasure as the sole good" that probably needs thought. As I mentioned in another recent thread some of us have been debating precisely that issue. I have used the term "long term pleasure" regularly myself, but I am getting more careful about it. Epicurus clearly says in the letter to Menoecus that

"

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."

So I think we need to be careful assuming that we can describe the goal as "long term pleasure." It is probably more accurate to say simply "Pleasure" for that reason, or to try to find modifiers such as "net pleasure" or "maximum pleasure" that do not indicate that time is the key factor. In fact we probably need to consider that it is hard to pin down what the key factor is, if not time. Is it "intensity?" Is it "percentage of experience?" Or what?

Pleasure being a feeling it is hard (impossible?) to reduce it to a measurement in terms of time, or space, or some other outside measurement.

Presumably that is why Epicurus generally talks about "pleasure" as the goal and does not combine it with some other form of limiting or modifying adjective.

This is interesting to think and talk about.

Post by "Charles" of October 3, 2019 at 10:48 PM

Reminds me of the graphs that Julie mentioned, where pleasure over time can only reach a "set ceiling", and that no matter the amount of time in any given example, continues to be a non-factor. I think a part of this misunderstanding comes from the Epicurean counter-argument against fearing death, as mentioned in his letter to Menoeceus: "*And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality.*". Where now the standard for Epicurean philosophy is; live life pleasurable for when you die you cease to exist, it only makes perfect sense to want to extend that pleasure for the longest amount of time as possible.

But of course, in many other sources such as **PD 19**, and later in that same letter as you quote, Epicurus does not get hung up on pleasure with any sort of extenuating circumstance or modifier.

Post by "Todd" of October 3, 2019 at 11:03 PM

Cassius - I haven't seen the thread on "long term pleasure" you refer to, so I apologize if I'm duplicating things that were pointed out there. If you could provide a link, I'd be interested in reviewing what was discussed there.

The Letter to Menoeceus immediately came to my mind:

Quote

We must then bear in mind that the future is neither ours, nor yet wholly not ours, so that we may not altogether expect it as sure to come, nor abandon hope of it, as if it

will certainly not come.

One risk in emphasizing "long term" pleasure, is that unexpected things can happen between now and the "long term". Future pleasures need to have an appropriate discount applied in our hedonic calculations to reflect that fact.

Also, if we're constantly referring to "long term pleasure", it can start to sound like we don't approve of pleasures that are immediately available. Like we have to earn our pleasures by suffering first or some such nonsense.

But we're not Cyrenaics either, and I think that's what most Epicureans mean when they use that expression. It's just a way of indicating that some consideration for the future is being taken into account.

It's interesting that plain old "pleasure" has so much psychological baggage attached that even Epicureans (myself included) are tempted to qualify it so often.

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2019 at 6:50 AM

Excellent points Charles and Todd.

Todd, I was referring to a discussion we had on a Skype call, the one Charles is referring to, in which [JAWS](#) referred to "the area under the curve." We have not yet done a graphic but have that on the to do list.

Basically we were discussing the feasibility of illustrating the issue of how long we should want to live by a standard x-y graph, with "pleasure" on the vertical Y axis, and time on the X axis.

That would make "the area under the curve" representative of the sum of pleasures over a lifetime.

But for the reasons we have repeated here, it does not seem correct that Epicurus was suggesting that the "area under the curve" as a result of time should be our ONLY concern. And we have to consider "what exactly are we measuring on the Y axis?" Is it "intensity" of pleasure, or how do we measure pleasure?

Epicurus also says in the letter to Menoeceus that "life is desirable" so it would seem that it is true that it is in fact desirable to live as long as possible, so long as pleasure dominates over pain, while at the same time it is not "necessary" to live forever in order to be satisfied with life.

I think both of these considerations are true, and as we explore and think about Epicurean philosophy it would be great to work on articulating this with more precision, because most of

us are trapped in sort of a religious perspective that if we are not immortal singing songs in heaven we are somehow miserable.