

Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy - 6 - What About Pleasures We Consider Bad Or Evil?

Post by "Cassius" of March 11, 2017 at 4:07 PM

[Cassius Amicus](#)

[March 7 at 7:06pm](#)

****Stoic Challenges To Epicurean Philosophy**** (6) From Epictetus... Epicureans believe that pleasure is the highest good. (Again, some people have actually disputed this but I think it's safe to say most Epicureans will go along with that claim, with the usual caveats.) However, most (if not all) pleasures have "intensionality", meaning that they are "about" something, the thing we take pleasure in. In other words, rather than just going around having free-floating pleasures, we're usually enjoying music, or the company of friends, or admiring some idea, or something. If we take pleasure in something, does it not seem (to many people if not all) that it makes more sense to say the thing being enjoyed is good rather than the feeling of enjoyment? When we take pleasure in something, isn't it often because we're judging it to be good at some level? (For Stoics, joy and pleasure, the passions not sensations, are defined as the belief that something good is present, or being experienced by us.)

We actually have a transcription of Epictetus employing this as a reductio with an Epicurean who visited his school, incidentally. (Some people might claim it's a fabrication, which is fair enough, although there's nothing to indicate that.) If we take pleasure in something bad, are we willing to say that the pleasure is still good? For example, is pleasure taken in torturing small children still good? Or would we need to qualify it and say that pleasure is only good if its object is also good? That seems to introduce a much stronger caveat than is implied in the Epicurean definition of pleasure as the highest good, though. Moreover, pleasure can be good or bad depending on whether its object is good or bad, that implies it's actually morally neutral, or "indifferent", as the Stoics put it. Pleasure in itself is neither good nor bad. Pleasure in bad things, like harming people for fun, is bad; pleasure in good things, like helping loved ones, is good. However, that seems to suggest that it's really the object that is good or bad, in itself, and the feeling of pleasure is only good or bad decoratively, i.e., its actually indifferent in itself. Some people will disagree with those intuitions but for those who accept them, like the Epicurean in the Discourses, it seems to create a contradiction between their professed doctrines and the implications of their moral preconceptions, on reflection.



Michael Carteron Epicureans agree, as both the hedonic calculus generally and their concept of justice go into this. Really I have to wonder how much he knows about Epicureanism.

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[Jason Baker](#) type unknown

Jason Baker Be very careful agreeing here, his opening sentence is completely disconnected from his conclusion.

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[Michael Carteron](#) type unknown

Michael Carteron I phrased it poorly, perhaps. More correctly it would be to say "They already went into this, and your reductio won't work."

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[Cassius Amicus](#) type unknown

Write a reply...

[Alexander Rios](#) type unknown

Alexander Rios What does it mean to "take pleasure in something bad"?

Do you mean that the person first judges it as pleasing, but then the same person continues to evaluate the consequences then changes his judgement and considers it an evil? Or do you mean that the person involved experiences pleasure, but other people (observers) judge the choice as bad/unpleasant? The same event can please some people and displease other people. It happens all the time. In wartime, an

event brings one side peace and tranquility and may terrorize their enemy.

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[Jimmy Daltrey](#)  or type unknown

[Jimmy Daltrey](#) What is being driven at, I think, is that pleasure in itself is valueless divorced from the object of pleasure. A psychopath torturing a child would be on a par with a nice sandwich.

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[Alexander Rios](#)

[Alexander Rios](#) A psychopath we would throw in jail. A proper subject for restraint.

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[Alexander Rios](#)  **Image may contain: text**

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[Jimmy Daltrey](#)

[Jimmy Daltrey](#) That's interesting. So the assessment of if a pleasure is perverse or not isn't individual. An Epicurean society would police morality in effect. (?)

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[Alexander Rios](#)

[Alexander Rios](#) How do Epicureans say goodbye?

"Peace and Safety"!

Harm is physical. We are bodies. Our soul (nervous system) is a part of our body. We value our lives, as only life provides the opportunity for happiness. Death offers nothing, as that without sensation, cannot experience pain or pleasure. Our soul has a mind, which is capable of memory. We learn. We avoid pain, suffering, and harm. We take action to prevent future harm. So each of us prudently polices.

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Alexander Rios

[Alexander Rios](#) Torquatus' multigenerational Epicurean ancestors engaged in battles to defend their way of life.

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Alexander Rios

[Alexander Rios](#) All people on Earth are homosapiens. We all suffer: hunger, thirst, cold. Bodies (human, animal, plants) like to metabolize.

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[Hiram Crespo](#) or type unknown

[Hiram Crespo](#) [Jimmy Daltrey](#) a society does not need to be Epicurean to police crime, as far as I know. Unless you're in Somalia and some other societies, generally you have access to judicial process. If you do not, it may be impossible to live a life of pleasure there, and you should migrate elsewhere for the sake of safety, for "anything you do for the sake of safety is a natural good". But yes, to live a life of pleasure, you will in all likelihood need to live under some kind of rule of law.

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[Cassius Amicus](#) type unknown

[Cassius Amicus](#) I agree with Hiram, with the additional clarification that there are probably many systems that will work in different contexts (rather than just the "rule of law" which might have some issues if it implies a single universal law). The bottom line is that I think history shows that there generally has to be ****some**** kind of mechanism in place or else bad things are going to happen.

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Alexander Rios

[Alexander Rios](#) Neighbors can get together as friends, and agree that some other neighbors are a danger to the peace and safety of those who came together, and they can work together, form contracts, and work together to restrain or expell.

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Jimmy Daltrey

[Jimmy Daltrey](#) I'm not sure why that surprised me.

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Cassius Amicus

Write a reply...

Cassius Amicus

Cassius Amicus "For Stoics, joy and pleasure, the passions not sensations, are defined as the belief that something good is present, or being experienced by us" << This is a key sentence. The belief that "something good" is present implies that there is some "essence of good" apart from the experience, analogous to Plato saying that there is "something ideal" exists separately in another dimension or Aristotle saying "something essential" exists in the thing in this dimension. I believe Epicurus would dispute this, and say that observation of nature (physics) establishes that all things are made of matter and void, and there are no ideal forms outside a thing nor essences within a thing. That leaves pleasure and pain to be considered as faculties, which is where Epicurus arranged them with the main set of faculties (the five senses) and also the anticipations (which I think are also best interpreted as faculties, as are all components of the "canon of truth.") So the entire approach of attempting to identify "good" and "bad" floating in the air or hiding within things is an abstract conceptual exercise that is doomed to failure. The only measure of whether we should consider a thing "good" or "bad" within itself is whether it gives us pleasure or pain.

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Hiram Crespo or type unknown

Hiram Crespo *BY which criteria do we KNOW that something is "good", how do we apprehend something "good"? Via pleasure. But one can not speak of the good without it being relative to the enjoyer, because one beer might be good, the second and third might not (based on after-effects); one piece of chocolate cake may be pleasant, but the second of third may be too dense.*

So "the good" is not chocolate cake or beer. They're only goods when they are pleasures that do not lead to disadvantage later.

*So if you ****lose sight of the goal that your nature seeks**** (pleasure), then you miss the enjoyment of "the goods" seeking after ideas rather than listening to your faculties. This is why it's dangerous to Platonize goods.*

Students of Epicurus must keep in mind that pleasure-aversion is a FACULTY.

As for the "pleasure in torturing small children"--the disadvantage comes from either spending the rest of your life in jail, or fearing that you will spend it in jail, or if you ARE a tyrant in a position of absolute authority, the disadvantage comes from the

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paranoia of tyrants: Saddam and Ghaddafi, and their family members, suffered greatly when the mobs rose against them, but even before that they trembled in their thrones. I think there's a Lucretius passage about kings trembling in their thrones, in fact.

Thousands of members of the Catholic clergy have also had to eventually face justice for their long-standing culture of predatory behavior. So both those in power and ordinary citizens eventually get disadvantages from "taking pleasure in torturing small children".

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