

After Religion and Death, The Third Greatest Threat To Happiness As The Highest Goal of Life

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2018 at 4:33 PM

Suppose for a moment that you were asked this question:

"What did Epicurus consider to be the most compelling arguments against setting 'pleasure' as the highest goal of life - arguments which he had to meet as a matter of the most urgent importance?"

Probably the majority (at least in the past, but probably still now today if we consider the world as a whole) would say: "The gods wouldn't like it and would punish you!"

Others would say "When you die you will face judgment, and you will burn in hell!, so you better live in fear of that and live a virtuous life now!"

But I want to suggest to you that there is a THIRD argument that Epicurus also felt he had to address, and that third argument is very clear, and very logically compelling, even to this day, and that Epicurus met it in very explicit and clear terms.

As a test on my thought process I'd like to see how many here would agree with me on what that is. Could we discuss here in this thread what that third best argument against making pleasure the highest goal of life might be?

Post by “Hiram” of December 27, 2018 at 5:11 PM

Ayn Rand and others might say it's whimsical or irrational.

Others who are chasing the "objective" morality ghost will argue that pleasure is subjective.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2018 at 5:15 PM

Those are good arguments to address as well, but in this case I have to very specific cites from Plato, and from Seneca, that I think show the setup explicitly. I want to let the question run for a while to see what other responses I get. Of course I may be wrong in suggesting this is third in importance, but i think it has a claim to that.

Post by “Michael” of December 27, 2018 at 5:47 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

Ayn Rand and others might say it's whimsical or irrational.

Others who are chasing the "objective" morality ghost will argue that pleasure is subjective.

I believe what the Objectivists argue is that life must be the highest good, since you can't have pleasure without being alive. For them, happiness is the reason for living after this.

Are you saying Epicurean morality isn't objective? I thought the idea of pleasure as the highest good isn't either an opinion or convention, but something undeniable in the Epicurean view. So that sounds objective to me.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2018 at 5:55 PM

Good to see you here Mike!

I was going to disagree with you as to what the objectivists argue, but after reading this link I think you are probably correct. I think Rand was circling around the same issue that Dewitt saw, that morality and goals are of relevance only to the living.

Quote:

An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*:

that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the evil.

Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of "value" is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of "life." To speak of "value" as apart from "life" is worse than a contradiction in terms. "It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible."

[The Virtue of Selfishness](#)

"The Objectivist Ethics,"

[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 17

http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/ultimate_value.html

Post by "Cassius" of December 28, 2018 at 10:42 AM

Here is what I propose as what Epicurus saw as the third greatest threat to placing pleasure/happiness as the goal of life.

First, I think you have to place yourself in his shoes, and in Athens of his age, and realize that all the schools worshiped at the feet of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and that they deemed logic to be of prime importance.

Second, I think you have to forget our tendency to think that Epicurus was all about running from pain as his primary goal in life. The other schools wanted to be the best that was possible to them, and no young student with any integrity was going to accept the "second-best" school, or to aspire to anything less than the logically best school and goal for life. Over three hundred years of Epicureans would not have accepted second best either.

With those premises in mind, we have to ask "What is the logical definitional foundation of "the best" goal of life, or "the best" in any other area?"

The answer is that something can be "the best" only when there is "nothing better."

And is it possible to know by logic whether there is "something better" than something?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/652-after-religion-and-death-the-third-greatest-threat-to-happiness-as-the-highest-g/>

Yes it is -- we know that something is not "the best" when it can be improved by adding something else to it to make it better!

In other words, anything that can be increased by definition cannot be the greatest possible. The Platonists / Stoics held Virtue to be their highest goal because they denied that Virtue could be increased. They said that virtue is virtue, and anything less than virtue is sordid. In a similar way the Christians argue that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and so therefore all our best attributes is no better than if we were worms.

To the Logicians, virtue is an absolute term. The wise cannot be more wise, the good cannot be more good, and virtue cannot be more virtuous. Once you have reached the summit of the mountain, there is no place left to go. And until you reach the summit of the mountain, your goal is to do nothing but climb higher.

But unless you CAN reach the summit - unless there IS a summit - then you are on the wrong path in the first place, because your goal cannot by definition be the highest possible goal.

This logical argument exists in both Plato's [Philebus](#), his most important work on pleasure, and in Seneca three hundred years later. Seneca states it most clearly and explicitly in the following passage from Letter 66 of his Moral letters to Lucilius. Here Seneca is defending his selection of Virtue as the goal that is greatest and best (parts of this seem contradictory and may be translation issues, but the opening and closing statements are clear):

"Therefore the power and the greatness of virtue cannot rise to greater heights, because increase is denied to that which is superlatively great. You will find nothing straighter than the straight, nothing truer than the truth, and nothing more temperate than that which is temperate. 9. Every virtue is limitless; for limits depend upon definite measurements. Constancy cannot advance further, any more than fidelity, or truthfulness, or loyalty. What can be added to that which is perfect? Nothing otherwise that was not perfect to which something has been added. Nor can anything be added to virtue, either, for if anything can be added thereto, it must have contained a defect. Honour, also, permits of no addition; for it is honourable because of the very qualities which I have mentioned.[5] What then? Do you think that propriety, justice, lawfulness, do not also belong to the same type, and that they are kept within fixed limits? The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect."

Note: THE ABILITY TO INCREASE IS PROOF THAT A THING IS STILL IMPERFECT.

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_66

The same argument exists in more extended and lengthy form in [Philebus](#). It starts with the following, but Socrates goes off on several tangents before he comes back to showing that because it is allegedly infinite, pleasure has no end of its own:

SOCRATES: I omit ten thousand other things, such as beauty and health and strength, and the many beauties and high perfections of the soul: O my beautiful [Philebus](#), the goddess, methinks, seeing the universal wantonness and wickedness of all things, and that there was in them no limit to pleasures and self-indulgence, devised the limit of law and order, whereby, as you say, [Philebus](#), she torments, or as I maintain, delivers the soul. — What think you, Protarchus? ...

SOCRATES: Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?

[PHILEBUS](#): They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.

SOCRATES: Nor would pain, [Philebus](#), be perfectly evil. And therefore the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good. But now — admitting, if you like, that pleasure is of the nature of the infinite — in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and [Philebus](#), can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind? And let us be careful, for I think that the danger will be very serious if we err on this point.

[PHILEBUS](#): You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.

SOCRATES: And you, my friend, are also magnifying your favourite goddess; but still I must beg you to answer the question. ...

....

SOCRATES: And let us remember, too, of both of them, (1) that mind was akin to the cause and of this family; and (2) that pleasure is infinite and belongs to the class which neither has, nor ever will have in itself, a beginning, middle, or end of its own.

<https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Philebus>

So what I am suggesting is that after the threat of gods, and after the threat of death, it was proper for Epicurus to attack the threat that was most urgent to him and to the schools of philosophy in Athens. And that argument was that pleasure cannot be the highest good because it has no limit. And if pleasure has no limit, there must be something higher than pleasure which must be used to regulate pleasure, and that this "something higher" (wisdom/logic/virtue) is the true goal to which we should all aspire - and not pleasure.

And so third in line in the texts of Epicurus, after the reasons not to fear gods, and not to fear death, is the reason that we need not fear the Socratic logical argument that pleasure is insatiable:

"PD3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain."

The same idea is in the letter to Menoeceus also very near the beginning: "So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything,

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and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it." What is this other than a statement that happiness is the limit to which we can aspire?

I suggest we also keep in mind that there is no evidence that the "40 doctrines" were originally divided into forty the way we have them today. Diogenes Laetius does not reference a division and simply calls them the Authorized doctrines. So although the second sentence of PD3 is not inconsistent, it doesn't necessary go immediately with the first sentence. In fact there are other logical arguments which it probably addresses, but it also complements the first sentence by emphasizing the completion once we have reached the full limit of our experience of pleasure: "When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together."

And of course in the rest of the Authorized Doctrines there are many other discussions of limits, all of which would appear to be related, in greater or lesser degree, to the need to refute Socrates on the issue of LIMITS:

PD 15. The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity.

PD 18. Bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation. The limit of mental pleasure, however, is reached when we reflect on these bodily pleasures and their related emotions, which used to cause the mind the greatest alarms.

PD 19. Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason.

PD 20. The flesh receives as unlimited the limits of pleasure; and to provide it requires unlimited time. But the mind, intellectually grasping what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of the future, procures a complete and perfect life, and we have no longer any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless the mind does not shun pleasure, and even when circumstances make death imminent, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life.

PD 21. He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. Thus he has no longer any need of things which involve struggle.

VS10. Remember that you are mortal and have a limited time to live and have devoted yourself to discussions on nature for all time and eternity and have seen "things that are now and are to me come and have been."

VS 25. Poverty, if measured by the natural end, is great wealth; but wealth, if not limited, is great poverty.

VS 59. What cannot be satisfied is not a man's stomach, as most men think, but rather the false opinion that the stomach requires unlimited filling.

VS 63. There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.

VS 81. The soul neither rids itself of disturbance nor gains a worthwhile joy through the possession of greatest wealth, nor by the honor and admiration bestowed by the crowd, or through any of the other things sought by unlimited desire.

In sum, I think it is reasonable to suggest that the main issue involved in "limits," is not that we should at any point accept less than what is best in life. To the contrary, the point is that we should aim for the best, but that nothing can be the best in life, and therefore nothing can be worthy of our goal, unless it has a "limit" in the sense of an end or highest point.

All other major philosophers suggest that "virtue" in some form or the other is the true highest and best. Epicurus identified the logical fallacy. The highest and best life of pleasure that is possible for any human is a life spent in the experience of the greatest number of pleasures, accompanied by the fewest numbers of pains, over a lifetime.

It is false to believe that the stomach requires unlimited filling, because the stomach can be filled only so far before it bursts at any one time. Similarly, over a lifetime, a single stomach can still hold only a fixed possible quantity of food.

As with the stomach, it is false to believe that a life requires unlimited pleasure. A single life can experience only so much pleasure in one lifetime before death takes us all away.

A lifetime of pleasure is the limit of pleasure and the logical refutation of Socrates' argument that there must be something higher.

And so Cicero was correct in saying that the Epicureans believed that "Nothing is better than a life of ease, full of, and loaded with, all sorts of pleasures." - Cicero, In Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3Asection%3D23>