

An Attempt to Reconcile Epicurus' Hedonism with His Epistemology and More Particularly with His Physics.

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In Book III of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlines four types of forensic questions for cases in which accountability is sought to be derived from actions, otherwise known as stasis theory. These are: 1) Was the act committed? 2) If so, were there harmful consequences? 3) If so, to what degree (or intensity) of harm? 4) All things considered, was the act justified? Ethics, in order to be substantive, must endeavour to forge its link between theoretical postulates and practical application, allowing passage from an epistemic process of beliefs or reasoned-out maxims to the arena of action (or inaction, as the case may be, which can in itself be considered a mode of action). It is not the intention to distort the analysis of the foregoing with a heavy-handed Aristotelian perspective, but to posit this initial forensic detail as ancillary to a deeper understanding between the seemingly disparate Epicurean hedonistic ethics (the privileging of the pleasures of the mind as enduring over that of the body, which is ephemeral) and his various assertions made in his physics and epistemology. In the process of our analysis, we will return to this fourfold question set, reframed in so far as it can elucidate more normative claims.

It proves difficult to set Epicurean ethics upon the foundation of his physics, for pleasure and pain are not atomic qualities. They are epistemic “movements” (and we use this term with reservation), for the pleasure that Epicurus endorses is that of the catastemic, or tranquil variety. However, we cannot be cavalier and ignore the suspiciously analogous links between the physics and the ethics, for even if constructing this bridge be a task worthy of Sisyphus, it may provide us with an understanding of a continuity among the mental processes of Epicurus as an attempt to remain as consistent as possible with his principles. These analogies will be put forward in a tentative and speculative fashion, but not as a decisive means of imputing to either his physics or ethics a causal relation that is firmly established.

For Epicurus, the supreme good is pleasure—and of this variety, the sort that produces a state of *ataraxia*. This state stands as the highest epistemological ideal for Epicureans since it is the state in which one is at complete untroubled peace, neither in want or excess (akin, in a slight way, to the Buddhist ideal of “nirvana”), and most importantly a freedom from pain and distress. He provides a typology of desires in terms of those that may be called full and those that may be deemed empty. When we speak of full and empty, we do not call up the strict definitions of bodies and voids, but more so the effect of full meaning being substantive, or material, and emptiness being non-substantive, or immaterial. In this typology there is a split between natural and empty desires, the empty being a process of purely imaginary fictions taken into the mind that plague it with complications that are unnecessary and inhibit a proper pursuit of pleasure. These empty desires are characterized as being hard to procure, beyond the immediate limits of our power, and with a tendency to cause more pain upon acquisition. For example, to desire the attainment of public office would entail grand efforts, and though it would bestow upon one prestige, title, and wealth, these forms of pleasure are not without their perils. Moreover, if the candidate fails to procure this pleasure, the candidate will feel a sense of loss and pain. Of the natural variety of desires, these are split up into the necessary (those desires that are complete the thought—that are what?) and the automatic (those desires that are inherent in the body for its maintenance). Of the necessary desires, Epicurus splits them up into three categories: those desires necessary for happiness (e.g. friendship), those necessary for freedom from distress (e.g., peace), and those necessary for living (i.e., rest). Owing to the privileged status of pleasure as itself the pursuit of life, its very goal, virtues such as justice, prudence, and so forth are rendered to be in the service of life—in fact, as the very instruments necessary to procuring a refined sense of pleasure. In this instance, virtues lend themselves to an unhindered attainment of various pleasures just as medicine lends itself to health.

Of these pleasures, Epicurus advocates the catastemic variety more than the kinetic. It is not that, as the Cyrenaics claim,¹ Epicurus rejects kinetic pleasures (pleasures associated with the body) wholesale, but that the quality of kinetic pleasures

¹ A rival school of hedonism, the Cyrenaics – counting among its number the famed Aristippus – advocated for physical pleasure being the means to a good life.

do not have the same lasting positive effects as more mind-based pleasures. Kinetic pleasures are typified by their ephemeral short duration, and frequently lead to pain as a consequence. But it is not as though Epicurus rejects all kinetic pleasure, for this can be sought for intrinsic purposes with the caveat that it is done with prudence and moderation. This is part of what Epicurus demands of us when we are to make our pleasures choiceworthy: i.e., that we will have a view to our future states and that reason will accompany our choices. In sum, mental pleasures are greater than bodily ones (Cicero, *De Fin.* I.55), for they yield up a more pronounced duration of pleasure that does not bring over-excited states in the mind.² Epicurus does not vilify bodily pleasures through a prohibitive asceticism, but asks us to mediate these sorts of pleasures with a view to reason and virtue. The occasional indulgence is pardonable, but a sustained voluptuous living will produce a course far from the ideal of *ataraxia*.

There are instances when pains are necessary ``evils`` so to speak, but they must be productive. Though it might first appear counterintuitive, the endorsement of some pains proves fecund for a variety of reasons. For instance, the only way we know to avoid pains is through experience. This inevitably occurs when we encounter a new situation that we have never experienced that may produce a painful result (like the child who has yet to form the conception of a hot stove or experiencing a first heartbreak) from which we learn. These painful instances fortify our knowledge and allow us to make the appropriate choices in the future to avoid such pains. Another example would be those pains which produce pleasurable results, such as the rigours and stresses associated with learning; though the student may navigate upon stormy seas as he or she attempts to understand the instructive lesson, the result is finally the attainment of understanding, an understanding which no doubt will produce pleasure.

We cannot pass over the importance of memory and experience in matters of choice. In fact, to choose one act over another to procure pleasure or lessen the degree of pain depends on possessing a knowledge as to what exactly promotes pleasure and pain. Memory, dependent upon time, image, and sensation, endows us with an archive of experiences we can draw upon in the face of making choices. Say, for instance, I wish to

² It should be noted that Cicero was a staunch admirer of Epicurean principles and makes frequent allusions to the words of Epicurus, explicitly or indirectly in his moral writings.

order a drink at a tavern. Because I have frequented taverns prior to this hypothetical event, and have sampled a number of the available liquors available for purchase, experience tells me that in the past I found a single malt scotch preferable to a blended whiskey. I know this because, having sampled both these drinks, I found the more aged drink to be more agreeable to my palate in relation to its alternative. The criteria for this judgement were my senses, which detected the two distinct tastes and allowed me to judge one as being more preferable to another. Having stored this event as memory allows me to pursue a course of action in the present towards that which evokes more pleasure. I have been thus conditioned by past pleasurable (or, by contrast, painful) experiences.³ Memory does indeed present heuristic benefit in guiding one's future choices on the horizon of possibilities.

Memory also assists me in making choices between events I have never experienced if and only if there are constitutive elements in these possible events that hold similarity with my prior experiences. This is the reason why I can decline an offer to drink a glass of knives because experience has shown me that knives are sharp and are not meant to be drunk. Though I have never experienced drinking a glass of knives, memory allows me to conjoin the perilous sharpness of knives with the established fact that my flesh is easily cut by such instruments. In this sense, as absurd as this example may be, memory and experience act as our motivation to act, to choose between possible experiences. And, for Epicurus, this is essential to selecting that which will produce the sort of pleasure we seek, while having a view to prior events and to consequences of our decisions.

But we now have to consider accidental pleasures. Without experience and memory, any pleasures we happen upon would be accidental. And indeed it is in our earlier years when we are at our most formative that pleasures and pains occur through trial and error. But once these experiences are formed and edified in memory, we become, with the aid of reason and selection, more capable of procuring tranquil states. This state of tranquility may be another reason why Epicurus speaks highly of venerable years, for the course and direction to the goal of pleasure is more linearly demarcated

³ This theory of conditioned behaviour can be found in P.T. Young: "The Role of Hedonic Processes in the Organization of Behaviour," in *Psychological Review*, LIX 1952, 249-62.

without the hindrance of limited experience and the hot temper of youth. In our youth, inclinations fuelled by desires cause several deviations from the goal of pleasure, and it is only through the continued edification of memory and experience that we can attain a state untrammelled by unchecked desires. So it is in this vein that Epicurus does not privilege grand achievements as being on the course to *ataraxia*, for these entail enormously laborious efforts—and most oftentimes at the risk and peril of inviting more pain than is necessary: “there is no need of actions which involve competition” (Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* I 17). There is in this statement a blush of Stoicism, especially insofar as one is encouraged to not enter into competitive situations where victory is not already assured.

Epicurus is a monist, for he believes that only one property is intrinsically valuable—and here we should realize that both pleasure and pain are degrees of one property because pain itself is not existent per se, but only the characteristic absence of pleasure. In this way, the pain-pleasure relation is univocal insofar as both sensations represent one movement with two possible effects, but this monism is tempered by the fact that pleasure is considered in the affirmative and granted positive status in his metaphysical understanding. Pleasure is the “yardstick for judging every good thing” (Epicurus *Letter to Menoecus* 127-32). This is not to say that Epicurus does not value virtues, but that they are secondary to the highest Good. Moreover, as a psychological hedonist, he attributes our pursuit of pleasure and aversion to pain to nature, as the “mainspring” of our conduct. We will examine this in more detail as we proceed.

The state of *ataraxia* is an absence of pain, and is unconscious, because it entails that there be no motions in the flesh or soul that threaten its tranquil stability. It is a state of not wanting. However, this formulation raises an objection: how can that which is unconscious be equated with the supreme good? It is usually by conscious acts and understanding that we recognize the Good, and so for those critics who espouse a Protagorean view of unconscious human measure as being innately of the Good, this form of the Good will not assuage them. This same criticism follows upon the heels of another, mainly as regards the question concerning why Epicurus does not recognize the

positive effects of pleasure itself rather than merely the cessation of longing. However, this criticism is quieted when we consider his fragments as a whole.

Thus far, our analysis has given us cause to prepare this argument, otherwise known as the Pleasure Theory of Goals:⁴

- 1) A person who desires or is motivated to produce a state of affairs commensurate with the acquisition of pleasure and the avoidance of pain will be thus motivated to prefer one state of affairs over another if and only if the person believes that his preference will produce the aforementioned goal.
- 2) If there exists a belief that pleasure can be acquired and pain avoided by committing to a course of action, this is in itself both a necessary and sufficient condition for a motivation to act in this regard.
- 3) And if there is a choice between two possible states of affairs, the person will choose that which will promise the greatest duration in a pleasurable circumstance in accord with (and assisted by) secondary virtues.

However, to make pleasure (or even happiness), our goal can be problematic owing to its elusive character. One has only to refer to John Stuart Mill's claim that happiness (or pleasure) cannot be achieved when we make it a goal in itself (cf. Mill's writings on Jeremy Bentham and the hedonic calculus). We must forget about it and have pleasure occur indirectly—just as we must not focus on sleep when trying to fall asleep, or just as squeezing a handful of sand will only succeed in causing the sand to slip away the more we tighten our grip. Once we reflect upon pleasure, especially when it is presently occurring, we negate it; we appear to posit ourselves outside the experience. Despite this paradox, however, our contention could be that the unconscious expression of pleasure does not threaten to be elusive, for we do not immediately reflect upon it. Moreover, we cannot insist that Epicurus is doing anything more than setting the foundation for our actions, and that that which occurs as subsidiary is done in that spirit

⁴ The Pleasure Theory of Goals was originally advanced by Henry Sidgwick (cf. *The Methods of Ethics*, Bk. II, Ch. 3), and has since been discredited by leading ethicists and psychologists; however, we advance it here as a tentative derivation of the text's Epicurean assertions (1-3 above). It is also an attempt to reconcile ethical hedonism with psychological hedonism, although there is an inherent inference suggesting the impossibility of the subject's impartiality, making no room for any act that can be authentically altruistic.

without reflection: that is, we come to express Epicureanism through a kind of instinct rather than a constant pause to reflect upon matters of choice. Perhaps this idea of non-reflection informs why Epicurus insisted that his disciples memorize his doctrines, for by being edified in the mind in said manner, the actions of choice and deliberation would become a matter of unconscious habit. This is echoed as a pedagogical tool in John Locke's notion of "cozening" children to knowledge through the use of amusements and rule-based games that are surreptitiously instructive.

One plaguing doubt still remains in terms of the explanatory cause of our so-called natural inclination to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and the inauguration of an entire ethical groundwork, something reminiscent of the criticism levelled against Democritus' ethics: though it is natural to seek pleasure and avoid pain, this state does not directly imply an "ought." How does a matter of fact compel us to choose in terms of ethical decisions? Deriving a normative claim from observing a purely descriptive behavioural phenomenon inherent in all human beings is pernicious, to say the least. For surely each of us is imbued with a tendency toward violence, but this tendency does not mean we necessarily ought to commit violent acts, to make beastly aggression a principle of endorsement. This process of deriving the "ought" from the "is" may be the corruption of the consistency of the principles themselves, for there are several observable instances of human behaviour that we could choose from to found an ethical stratagem. For example, Epicurus states that competition is an act incommensurate with pleasure; however, competition is observable in all species (for food, for mates, etc.). Why could we not espouse an ethical doctrine of competitive values, a Calliclesian ethics?⁵ This is why it may be necessary to make links among the ethics, epistemology and physics, for this connection would fortify the foundation for the assertion of pleasure-seeking.

In evaluating any ethical principles, Epicurean or other, we should have recourse to the following criteria⁶:

⁵ Callicles is the disputant in the Platonic dialogue, *Gorgias*. Callicles asserts that the few strong should dominate over the many weak. Socrates forces Callicles through maieutic argumentation that the many weak together could overcome the few strong in physical contest. Apart from this text being a foundational one for a study of rhetoric and linguistic reference theory, it also stands as a potential advocacy of democratic ideals. Nietzsche would wrest Callicles' point of the "few strong" in his own work, recasting it in terms of the will to power and (arguably) reconciling the 'ought' and 'is' of actions that have ethical basis.

⁶ I am indebted to Richard B. Brandt for the succinct formulation of these criteria; see his *Ethical Theory*, Prentice Hall, 1962, 299-300.

1. To ensure that the principles are consistent in themselves.
2. To ensure that the principles contain intelligible notions.
3. To ensure that the principles are coherent with understanding and facts.
4. To ensure that the principles are theoretically sound and applicable.
5. To ensure that, if the principles are founded on more general principles, they do not produce incorrect implications to support what they assert.
6. To ensure that where there is contestation, there is not a misunderstanding of the positions or the terminology.

In the interests of confining the scope of our inquiry, we may here briefly evaluate Epicurus' ethics according to these criteria. We have already shown above how there is a possible violation of the first proposition in terms of inconsistency. As for the second proposition, we find in the literature a seemingly well-bred consensus on the notions, linked consistently with appropriate definitions; however, one may take issue on the actual terms themselves.⁷ Epicurus is careful in basing his ethical assertions upon matters of established fact, a modelling after observations of nature, so the third proposition is not violated. Considered in this paradigm, the ethics seem to withstand a continuous and consistent link between theory and practice, where all action is linked with the goal of pleasure, and so the fourth proposition is maintained. The problem with the fifth proposition can be viewed as a corollary of the problem of number one, for application may not follow from mere observation in this regard, the implications being highly selective in terms of observable fact at the exclusion of other natural symptoms of human beings that also may be witnessed. The last proposition seems more applicable to the gross misconstruing of Epicurean doctrine by the more ribald Cyrenaics, though both schools seem to share many of the same tenets in terms of epistemology and a few shared terms in their mode of ethics.⁸

⁷ The risk of defining the derivatives of pleasure as a means of proposing actions on the basis of a stable definition presupposes that there is universal consensus on the very definition of what constitutes pleasure. In a survey of literature on the issue of pleasure, most philosophers vary in terms of what constitutes pleasure. Bentham, for example, constructs a pseudo-empirical evaluation of pleasure in terms of certain activities possessing a certain number of "hedons." The danger of definitional complicity in this regard is compounded thus further by placing them in a value-based hierarchy.

⁸ I base this claim on the informative work done in this area by Voula Tsouna, especially in [The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School](#) (Cambridge University Press 1998) where the rival claims and mutual affinities between the two schools are given a fair and clarified treatment.

Before we seek to establish some semblance of physical and epistemological foundation for the ethics, we shall return to Epicurus' "stasis theory" of *ataraxia* as a kind of litmus test for Epicurean ethics.

1. *Do we seek pleasure and avoid pain?*

This seeking is established by recourse to natural and observable facts of our behavioural disposition. There is nothing formally normative in the assertion that it is the case that we do indeed seek pleasure and avoid pain. It is merely a question of fact, this fact being learned through observation—the observation of existent things given credence by the truth of the senses, and the observation of several instances of pleasure seeking and pain-avoidance accumulating and sedimenting into memory. So, by an inductive process, memory and experience attest that the case is true.

2. *If so, are there harmful consequences?*

This matter can only be settled by an observation of the outcomes of a variety of pleasures, classified and enumerated by type, duration, and intensity. Established here are the means of procuring pleasures, and a classification of these to determine which yields the most beneficial varieties. In terms of pain, that, too, is measured according to these terms.

3. *If harm is the result, what is its degree and duration?*

“Pain does not last continuously in the flesh: when acute it is there for a short time, while the pain...does not persist for many days” (Epicurus KD 4). It becomes established that some pleasures do produce eventual harm, such as continued bodily excesses, but these harmful delicacies are due to kinetic intensity, comparable to the burning coil of magnesium that emits high energy for a short duration or the quick exhaustion of phospho-creatine in the body. When the pleasures are of such intensity, they become quickly extinguished, leaving in their wake a vacuum—a vacuum otherwise known as pain.

4. *If the degree and duration of pain are existent, is the risk of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain justifiable?*

As enumerated above, some pains are necessary and therefore justified in the future pursuit of pleasure. Of course, the goal of *ataraxia* does not take into full consideration the timeliness of acts (a necessary condition of memory and the ability to make reasoned choices), but at the time of Epicurus' writing, stasis theory (the belief that the mind and body are ideal in a state of complete rest) had been appended to by writers like Hermagorus, who added the notion of timeliness by adopting Gorgias' term of “kairos” (in Greek, the “right, or opportune moment” as distinct from *chronos*, or linear time taken as a whole).⁹

⁹ For a more developed notion of Greek time, cf. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, wherein he discusses the fundamental metaphysical differences between *chronos* and *aion* in particular without soliciting the notion of *kairos*.

Speculative Links

Now that the basic precedents of Epicurean *ataraxia* have been established above, it may prove useful to engage in a few speculative considerations for future direction on this subject.

1. Conscious pleasurable states come to be from mediation with something outside the body, while unconscious pleasure (*ataraxia*) is equilibrium of the body where the forces of need and external forces are balanced, cancelled out. But due to the fact that there are objects that impinge upon the body, and an internal state that reacts to external stimuli and impels us to act (such as hunger), there is change in the bodily state toward pleasure. In order for desire or satiety to come to be, there must be a movement of the atoms to stimulate said responses (be their originating from an external source or deriving internally through imaginings). For nothing, including pleasure, can come to be out of nothing. This claim is an *ex nihilo nihil fit* argument (“nothing comes from nothing”). Something as mundane as hunger is a good example of this case. The desire to eat which accompanies hunger is due to an atomic cause: the body possesses fewer atoms over time due to the continued moulting of a constant emission of atoms, and this situation can only be restored to balance by a replenishment of substance, a claim echoed in Lucretius’ *De Natura Rerum* to explain why objects and people don’t simply just shrink until they vanish.
2. Pleasures must be in infinite supply and of differing varieties, for if pleasures were finite there would be the possibility that one day all pleasures would be exhausted and succeeding generations could not attain them. This conclusion is comparable to the explanation that there are an infinite amount of atoms that give rise to why things can continue to come into being (Lucretius I. 225-37). If pleasure or atoms were finite in number, and time is infinite, there would come a point when both would be exhausted.
3. In his *Letter to Herodotus* (39-40), Epicurus asserts that the reality of bodies is attested to by our senses, and that if there were no void, bodies would remain unmoved. We can here perform a case of substitution, for it suffices to say that pleasure “exists” (or is perceivably existent in the mind) because our senses detect its presence. Moreover, if the means of pleasure did not have spaces which it could “occupy,: so to speak, those who were in the absence of a state of pleasure could never experience the presence of pleasure. Despite Aristotle’s invective against the atomists’ notion of vacuum, we retain it here to describe how movement is at all possible. And so, as well, pleasure is made distinct by what it is not; namely, its absence (or, pain).
4. Pleasure and the absence of pleasure (pain as the privative description of pleasure) are substantial qualities in the mind. Thoughts which incur painful desires of longing through imagination are not in themselves substantive, for it is in this instance that the mind complicates itself unnecessarily over that which is beyond its powers to procure. Real desires, by contrast, are felt in

the body without the provocation of the mind. That is, the desires are produced by the bodily state, such as hunger and thirst. Other forms of full desires by which the subject wishes to avoid the heat of a flame, or any such aversion, are originally founded by a bodily state that had in the past experienced the pain of non-avoidance, and so the mind does not provoke the act. However, it is formed by experience, and experience is formed by sensations, sensations that attest to the truth of objects, with those objects being the substantive ground of this so-called mental provocation. As for the full desires such as friendship that do not appear to have any external source of provocation, these may be attributable to the natural disposition of human beings to commune and avoid the pain of isolation, and so friendship takes on a role of utility beneficial to the subject.

5. Pleasures are by necessity varied, just as atoms are distributed in varying concentrations and sizes to account for the differentiation of objects, for if pleasures were not varied there would be no differentiation in terms of type. However, this does not entirely invalidate the Epicurus' monistic hypothesis, since pleasure is a univocal term with varied expressions.
6. We may equate pain with void, for if pain is defined privatively as the absence of pleasure, maybe there is a problem with our definition of pain, or our comprehension of the interaction between substance and void/privated substance. Because we cannot admit of a middle term, there is only pleasure and its absence in a spectrum. This middle term would be the curious absence of both pleasure and pain. ``Pain`` provides a location for pleasure just as the void provides a location for atoms. This movement allows for us to experience different degrees of pleasure over time.

It has been my hope that I have not taken too gross of a liberty with these conjectures, nor to have been too sparse with the expositional analysis as set forth from the start. This list is by no means an exhaustive account of the variety of ways we can attempt a reconciliation between Epicurean ethics and his physics, nor have we exhausted all the criticisms that can be levelled against the theory. More to the effect, it provides an example of the strategies we may utilize rather than an exemplary use of one strategy for the disclosure of a fully fleshed-out analysis. As I am more familiar with a process of ideas rather than arguments themselves, I hope that this attempt at argumentative rigour marks a growing trend toward a more refined approach to scholarship. More refined, yet still speculative.

Despite Epicurus' rarefied and sophisticated definition of pleasure as being the absence of pain (thereby hitching its definition on a non-affirmative instance), it is another pleasure narrative in a large arcna of such attempts – attempts found in Descartes, Locke, Bentham, Nietzsche, Freud, and Moore. One of the dangers of Epicurean hedonism is its tendency to epistemologically transcendentalize pleasure in such a way as to make it a passage to the Good. However, one of the fringe benefits – and one that Epicurus himself may not have acknowledged – is found in the ethical domain: in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche states that all morality and its impetus are based on principles of pain and pleasure. Or, more accurately, that of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.