

Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 6: Epicurus: Katastematic, Kinetic, and Restorative Pleasures

I have been arguing for a revisionist theory of kinetic pleasure, championed by several recent scholars, among them David Konstan and David Wolfsdorf.ⁱ According to the older model, based primarily on one section of a passage from Cicero, kinetic pleasures are those that fulfill desires, while katastematic pleasure is the state of being satiated and thus free from desire. We are suggesting that this is not what Epicurus meant by kinetic pleasure. Rather, he has described kinetic pleasure in KD 18 as those delightful variations and embellishments of the basically peaceful life. If so, where does he stand with respect to pleasures of restoring the body to its natural state?

We often talk about the sensory pleasures of “eat, drink, and be merry.” But wherein lies the pleasure of eating and drinking? Is the restoration of a hungry and thirsty body to its natural state really the essence of pleasure? Isn’t being hungry and thirsty a painful state? If so, does pleasure demand a prior lack or pain? To clarify Epicurus’ view on the status of restorative pleasures, I will first lay out Aristotle’s position and remark on what continues to trouble me about it. Then I will relate Aristotle’s view to that of Epicurus.

Aristotle articulates his position on the process of restoration twice in *Nicomachean Ethics* 7 (1152b-1153a, 1154b). His view is that when we are restoring the body through food and drink, it is the part of us that is healthy that enjoys the sensory pleasure, while the part that is depleted restores itself. It is as if the part of the bodily organ that is healthy looks on while the depleted part replenishes itself, so we only find pleasure in restoration *accidentally*. Thus, pleasure is a function of health and sufficiency rather than deficiency, depletion, or lack, a view David Konstan expresses cogently in a recent article.ⁱⁱ It is quite in keeping with Aristotle’s view that happiness consists in *energeia*, in the actualization, realization, or expression of our capabilities. He conceives of pleasure, too, as *energeia*—as the unimpeded activity of a natural state (NE 7), or its completion or full flowering, like the bloom of youth (NE 10).

Aristotle, in other words, takes a normative view of pleasure. We know that for Aristotle, one can think one is happy and not be; to be happy or flourish is an objective state—the actualization of the soul's excellence. Likewise, one can think one is experiencing pleasure, but not be experiencing *genuine* pleasure. Not everything one finds pleasant qualifies for Aristotle as genuine pleasure. What a deficient soul takes pleasure in may not be true pleasure; when we are ill, we find the bitter sweet. This is a convincing way to disqualify unhealthy pleasures, such as pleasure in the torture of others. Pleasure is the activity of the healthy soul in its unimpeded state; what the unhealthy soul delights in is *not* to be counted as genuine pleasure.

Aristotle's conception of pleasure is thus very close to his conception of happiness. *Eudaimonia* is the activity of the soul expressing the best and most complete excellence, which is contemplation. When a being does that, it experiences pleasure. Moreover, life is perception, and all sentient beings take pleasure in perception (NE 9:9). Activities of awareness—perception and thinking—culminate in theoretical contemplation (*theôria*), and this is the highest pleasure.ⁱⁱⁱ We experience pleasure to the degree that we engage in this fullest expression of cognition.

This helps to explain why Aristotle denies that restorative pleasure is true pleasure. Since there is some pleasure that does not require lack (e.g. that of mathematics and other forms of theoretical study), restoration cannot be the essence of pleasure.^{iv} Aristotle also offers several reasons for the conclusion that pleasure is not a process (*kinêsis*)—for example, because we take pleasure in every moment of an activity. Thus pleasure must be closer to an actualization or realization (*energeia*) and not a process, whereas restoration is a process. Therefore it is not the process of restoration that brings us pleasure when we eat or drink; rather, it is the healthy part's awareness or perception of the substance ingested, while the part in deficiency incidentally is restored to sufficiency. Or as this has been described in literature on Epicurus, the pleasure of taste is gustatory—it is enjoyed by the mouth and palate—rather than restorative, i.e. enjoyed by the stomach and organs whose hunger and thirst are being sated.

Aristotle is basing his challenge on a view suggested by Plato. In the *Philebus*, Plato suggests that the pleasures of restoration are mixed pleasures, because they are dependent upon a prior lack or deficiency. To enjoy a good meal requires that one suffer the discomfort of the prior gnawing of hunger. In this view, pleasure increases as the depleted part is nourished; pleasure is the restoration of a bodily organ to its satisfied state. But it is not the depleted part that is enjoying being replenished; that part is in at least partial pain. This is why Plato called the pleasures of replenishing mixed pleasures. Aristotle thus argues that it is rather the healthy part that enjoys the pleasure of food and drink.

But let us pose a challenge to this view. It seems experientially true that we enjoy food and drink more when we are moderately hungry or thirsty, and when we are replenished, we enjoy it less. Thus it would seem to be the depleted part of the organ that is enjoying the nourishment, rather than the healthy part. Aristotle, however, would respond that pleasure is an expression of health rather than deficiency; to drink when thirsty is an expression of our body's self-maintaining activity, the way our body keeps us alive. Our body enjoys doing what is healthy. And this may be a key to Epicurus' view. What Epicurus terms katastematic pleasure is much like Aristotle's unimpeded activity of a natural state; it is the natural pleasure experienced when the organism is functioning smoothly. It is the pleasure of being alive; living and functioning in a healthy way feels good because it is good.

If katastematic pleasure is our ultimate goal (*telos*), however, why does Epicurus seem to put so much emphasis on sensory pleasures? Several statements of Epicurus have caused outrage in commentators over the centuries. For example: "I cannot think what the good is, if I subtract the pleasures of taste, subtract those of sex, sounds, and the pleasant motions that arise from the sight of a beautiful form."^v A longer version of this quotation occurs in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*:

For my part I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in a man as a whole. Certainly it is impossible to say that mental delight is the only good. For a delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation of all the things I just mentioned—to be of a nature able to acquire them without pain. . . (Epicurus, *On the End*; Cicero, *Tusculan disputations* 3.42-3.)

And we recall other statements suggesting the importance of bodily pleasures:

“The flesh’s cry is not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For one who is in these states and expects to remain so could rival even Zeus in happiness.” (*Vatican Sayings* 33)^{vi}

“The pleasure of the stomach is the beginning and root of all good, and it is to this that wisdom and over refinement (culture) actually refer. (*Athenaeus* 546F)

These texts present a conundrum, since Epicurus makes it clear in the *Letter to Menoeceus* that the highest state is one of lack of anxiety and painlessness. In the Letter, his point of departure in discovering the human good is the instinctual, natural desire of all living beings for comfort and lack of pain. Why then in these other statements does he emphasize the positive kinetic pleasures as a point of departure instead?

Perhaps his point is to some extent polemical, as he appears to be making an argument against the Platonic-Aristotelian viewpoint that denigrates pleasures of the flesh in favor of purely mental contemplation. Thus he emphasizes that *his* point of departure is our natural desire for pleasure, which in its most primal form is physical and sensory. However, note the irony: in Epicurus’ conception of the ultimate good it seems as if one *could* withdraw the pleasures of sight, sound, and touch, in favor of enjoyment of painlessness and freedom from worry. Perhaps he wants to emphasize that one cannot achieve a conception of such an elevated state without beginning from the very primal nature of a human being. Therefore, it goes along with his epistemological point that we begin from the most basic roots of perception. Epicurean ethics is built on a firm epistemology, which begins with the most basic drive of a human being for pleasure and avoidance of pain. In this, he is like the utilitarians, who also want to root their ethics in empiricism.^{vii}

Thus his point is not that the katastematic state depends on the presence of kinetic variations; to the contrary, enjoyment of these dynamic pleasures depends on the katastematic state of painlessness.

Rather, his point is that in order to conceive of the highest good, we must look for what all pleasures share in common. One cannot conceive of a state of peace, in other words, without the variations of sensory and mental kinetic pleasures. *It is the affective drive of humanity that reveals our highest good.* If we begin with the basic drive of all sentient beings for pleasure, we can arrive through reason at the understanding that the greatest pleasure depends on the fundamental state of freedom from disturbance. Sensuous delights are just a variant on the basic state of comfort, warmth, and security that all living beings from infancy desire.^{viii}

This view has the benefit of resolving the tension that has been perceived between strains of asceticism and hedonism in Epicurus' thought. Lack of disturbance does not mean lack of sensory perceptions, and lack of pain does not imply lack of feeling or pleasure.^{ix} Since we are hylomorphic beings—beings of animate and sensate flesh—pleasure requires involvement of the body and senses. To enjoy sensory pleasure we need to have a healthy constitution; therefore, we can most enjoy sensory pleasures when we enjoy them in moderation.

Thus kinetic pleasure depends on prior katastematic pleasure. When our bodily organs are in a stable state, they can enjoy the variations that kinetic pleasure brings.^x Like Aristotle, Epicurus does not recognize the process of restoration as pleasure. When the body is eating or drinking, the part of the body that is healthy enjoys sufficiency.^{xi} David Wolfsdorf suggests that Lucretius had it right: Epicurus sees the pleasures of eating and drink as gustatory, rather than restorative—in other words, we enjoy the pleasures of taste, rather than the experience of our stomachs becoming full and our organs hydrated.

Indeed, even the passage in Cicero that speaks of the difference between the process of drinking and the pleasure of not needing to drink goes on to discuss the variations of pleasure:^{xii}

“In the case of one who is thirsty, is drinking a pleasure?” “Who could deny it?” “Is it the same pleasure as having a quenched thirst?” “No, it is quite a different kind. A quenched thirst is a ‘static’ pleasure, whereas the pleasure of having one’s thirst quenched is ‘kinetic.’” “Then why, I asked, do you use the same word for such dissimilar things?”

From this section of the passage, scholars have deduced that Cicero describes the distinction between katastematic and kinetic pleasure as one between the restoring of a bodily need and the experience when all one's needs have been fulfilled. However, if we continue reading the passage, we see that he goes on to use the term kinetic pleasure to refer to variations on the static condition:

“Do you not remember, he replied, what I said a little while ago, that once all pain is removed, pleasure can vary in kind but not be increased?”

“The variation you are speaking of is rather unclear: you say that the height of pleasure is to be freed from pain, and that when we taste those pleasures which gives the senses a sweet sensation, then we experience “kinetic” pleasure. It is this sort of pleasure, you claim, which brings variation, but fails to add to the pleasure of being free from pain, though why you call the latter pleasure at all is a mystery to me.

The objector adds that even if we grant that nothing is better than being in a state of no pain, this does not show that a state of no pain is pleasure. However, the Epicurean spokesman Torquatos responds that the state of no pain is indeed, the greatest possible pleasure. Thus, kinetic pleasure is enjoyment of the process of variation of the painless state.^{xiii}

How then might we re-read Torquatus' assertion about the pleasure of drinking? When he points to the pleasure of drinking, Cicero's Epicurean spokesman Torquatus, like Lucretius, may mean the gustatory pleasure of the palate, not the filling up of the digestive organs. The palate is enjoying the pleasure of food and drink while the lacking body is being refilled; the dry and empty state of the body makes the pleasures of taste all the richer.^{xiv}

Desires for food, drink, and shelter from the cold are clearly necessary desires, but for Epicurus replenishing per se is not pleasure. As David Konstan puts it, corresponding to the state of lack is not the process of replenishing, but the state of sufficiency.^{xv} When the body is experiencing lack, the part of the body that is not lacking broadens as the body is being replenished. It is not that the restoration from lack is producing a positive process of pleasure. Rather, at each moment, the breadth of the organ that is

enjoying katastematic pleasure is increasing.^{xvi} If pleasure is actually the experience of sufficiency, perhaps at each moment we are replenishing the dry organ, it experiences the pleasure of having enough. Pleasure is not about lack, but about enjoying fullness. Pleasure is the experience of wholeness. This makes intuitive sense of Aristotle and Epicurus' view.

It is clear that Epicurus denies that there is an intermediate state: we are either in a state of pleasure or one of pain. Thus pleasure cannot be the experience of replenishing a lack; that would imply an intermediate state of mixed pleasure and pain. As Wolfsdorf argues, if pleasure is constituted by painlessness, the incremental removal of pain does not necessarily constitute pleasure. Katastematic pleasure is achieved when pain is gone. But if there is no intermediate state, then the incremental decrease of pain need not be accounted as pleasure.

To summarize, it is clear that Epicurus believed that the highest pleasure is the stable pleasure of complete calmness of soul and lack of pain. Human beings in that state can enjoy the kinetic pleasures that sweeten the senses: music, art, nature, sensory delights. Pleasure comes from sufficiency, not lack. When humans experience lack, we are in danger of falling prey to what Epicurus sees as unnecessary desires, the desire for things that are wholly superfluous, such as wealth and honors, and desire for very specific ways to fulfill natural desires—luxury foods rather than simple fare, complex technological devices rather than simple modes of communication, states of ecstasy or intoxication rather than natural states of joy. However, Epicurean wisdom teaches that in fact we do not need much to live a rich and fulfilling life. When we experience a state in which we are satisfied and complete, we can enjoy all the variations that life brings.

ⁱ C. Diano, *Epicuri Ethica* (1946) and John Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (1972), and David Konstan and David Wolfsdorf, who follow Diano and Rist. See Wolfsdorf, "Epicurus on *Euphrosynê* and *Energeai* (DL 10.136), *Apeiron* 42:221-57, at 246-53, for a historical summary of the positions.

ⁱⁱ David Konstan, "Epicurean Happiness: A Pig's Life?" 1-24, at 15. Plato argued that this sort of pleasure does suggest a lack of knowledge, which draws one to study. But Aristotle seems to believe that even God—who has complete knowledge—enjoys the contemplation of truth.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Broadie, "Philosophical Introduction," Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 70.

^{iv} It seems to me that his justification is somewhat definitional.

^v Atheneus 12.546E; cf. Cicero, *Tusculun Disputations* 3.8.42.

^{vi} A.A. Long and D. Sedley *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 volumes, (hereafter LS) 21G, p. 116.

^{vii} What the two share is what certain theorists of pleasure have termed "hedonic tone." See Appendix 1, "Pleasure: Attitude or Object?"

^{viii} David Wolfsdorf offers an intriguing formulation of this point. He suggests that the statements we have cited do not imply that kinetic, perceptual pleasures are the only good. Rather, perceptual pleasures reveal katastematic pleasures, because they depend upon them. That is, "the smooth functioning of the perceptual faculties indicates the correlative katastematic conditions." When we enjoy the pleasures of taste, sex, hearing, and sight this is a perceptual manifestation of the healthy functioning of our natural faculties. Our physical organs are working well (katastematic physical pleasure) and we may in addition take conscious pleasure in the healthy working of our physical being (katastematic mental pleasure). The good is pleasure, but it is not just episodes of sensual pleasure. We can enjoy the variations of pleasure in events because we are in a stable state of pleasant well-being. When we are healthy, we feel good; when we run or dance or sing or play, we experience the full expression of our healthy joy. David Wolfsdorf, "Epicurus on *Euphrosynê* and *Energeai* (DL 10.136), *Apeiron* 42:221-57, at 245.

This perspective makes sense of the fact that Epicurus seems to have regarded the pleasures of the stomach as the beginning and root of good. Perhaps what he meant by this is that a being cannot experience its natural state of pleasure when it is in distress because of lacking the necessary requirements of life. The natural state of the living being is a pleasant one, but this is very difficult to experience when we are ravaged by hunger, parched by thirst, or in painful disease. Epicurus himself was able to achieve an act of attention whereby his attention was focused on the memory of pleasant philosophical conversation. This focus on mental pleasure distracted him from and overcame the pain of his body. Thus his statement in KD 3 that a being cannot experience pleasure and pain at the same time must mean in the same part of the being in the same way. He clearly was able to experience bodily pain and mental pleasure at the same time.

^{ix} As suggested by Boris Nikolsky, "Epicurus on Pleasure," *Phronesis* 46:440-65.

^x This is the view of David Wolfsdorf and David Konstan (following J.M Rist and C. Diano). See above, note .

^{xi} We might add that even when food or drink touches the part of the bodily organ that is lacking, one might see this as an experience of fullness, rather than of lack.

^{xii} Wolfsdorf, “Epicurus on *Euphrosynê* and *Energeai*,” 248-9.

^{xiii} In the Aristotelian terms used by Wolfsdorf, kinetic pleasure is the secondary actualization of the primary actual state of being in health.

^{xiv} As we have seen, Aristotle’s view is that the body takes pleasure precisely in those things that enable its healthy functioning. As my student Madeline Aruffo pointed out, we do not normally desire to drink motor oil.

^{xv} Konstan, “Epicurean Happiness: A Pig’s Life?,” 15.

^{xvi} See Rist, *Epicurus: an Introduction*