

Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 8: Epicurus: Mental Pleasures, Katastematic and Kinetic

We have explored the relationship between katastematic and kinetic pleasures of the body and the status of restorative pleasures. What about mental pleasures? Epicurus holds that all pleasures have a mental component: there is a primitive psychic response in what we think of as physical pleasures. What we term mental pleasures represent the response of the soul to mental events (although on one level, even mental or psychic events can be explained in purely material terms, as the movements of atoms).ⁱ In DL 10.136, Diogenes Laertius quotes the words of Epicurus in his work *On Choice*: “On the one hand, freedom from mental disturbance (*ataraxia*) and freedom from bodily pain (*aponia*) are katastematic pleasures (*katastematikai*); on the other hand joy (*khara*) and delight (*euphrosynê*) are regarded as kinetic activities (*kata kinêsin energeia*)ⁱⁱ (or: “are seen as involving stimulation (*kata kinêsin*) through activation (*energeia*).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now most scholars agree that *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance) is a katastematic pleasure of the mind, while *aponia* (freedom from bodily pain) is a katastematic pleasure of the body. That leaves joy and delight. Joy, we can agree, is a kinetic pleasure of the mind. Is *euphrosyne* a kinetic pleasure of the body? Boris Nikolsky argues that the *phro* root strongly suggests a mental connotation; it is an experience of the *phrên*, the mental part of us located in the chest (cf. *phronêsis*, practical wisdom; *sophrosynê*, temperance). However, David Wolfsdorf shows evidence that it could very well refer in Epicurus’ time to pleasures of the body, for example the good cheer of festive celebrations.^{iv}

What then is the distinction between the pleasure represented by *ataraxia* and joy (*khara*)? We learn from Lucretius and the *scholion* to the *Letter to Herodotus* that joy is a rational emotion;^v it is experienced by the rational soul, whose seat is in the chest. Moreover in a fragment from *On the Goal*, Epicurus writes: “For the stable constitution of the flesh and the reliable expectation concerning this contain the highest and most stable joy (*khara*).”^{vi} So one example of joy is the joy taken in the

katastematic condition of the body, both experiencing it as present and having confidence that it will continue in the future.^{vii}

Note that every physical feeling has a mental counterpart, or rather, that we experience physical sensation through the mind. That is, the idea of a “non-rational soul” means that there is a psychic dimension to physical sensation. A corpse does not feel; we need soul-atoms in the body to experience. Thus the Epicurean model is not unlike current models of perception: we see not just through the eyes, but through the brain. In Epicurean terms, when we hear, the vibrations touch the soul atoms of our ear and the atoms of our non-rational psyche register these sounds. The pleasure is registered by both the body and the mind; there is no separation between the physical sensations and the awareness of them, with its accompanying pleasure.

But let us then analyze listening to a complex piece of music, such as a Beethoven symphony. In addition to the pleasure our body perceives through the non-rational movement of the atoms of the soul, there is also the rational pleasure of its complex artistry, which animals could not experience. This would be joy, registered in the rational element of the mind.^{viii} It seems to me that this points to an interesting feature of the way we think about pleasure. I believe we conceive pleasure in two ways. One involves the purely pleasurable sensations that animals can experience as well. Even this will have a mental component, experienced by the non-rational part of the soul, whose atoms are distributed throughout the body. This experience in itself entails awareness, the same awareness animals have of pleasure.

However, there is another aspect of pleasure, experienced by the part of us that “takes pleasure” in creative pursuits, in music, even in the natural joy of our bodies. For example, we are running with our pet dog. The dog “enjoys” running and we do as well. But a dimension of our pleasure is not just the physical sensations and our psyche’s registration of them. Part of the pleasure is that which we take as a mental and physical unity. This rational joy is not an abstract thinking about the pleasure; rather, it is the self-consciousness we have when we consciously enjoy the physical sensations of our bodies. I believe

this self-consciousness is what Epicurus means by joy. Animals are aware, but they are not aware that they are aware; they do not possess the self-consciousness that creates the experience of conscious, rational joy.^{ix}

And here David Konstan's recent re-thinking of the issue may help us. Konstan has suggested that if the atoms of our non-rational souls can be distributed throughout the body, they can also be distributed within the rational part of the soul in the chest. Thus, perhaps the physical experience of pleasure can also be registered by the rational part of the soul. It is possible that the reverse might also be true: the experience of thinking about Beethoven or philosophy in the rational part of the soul might affect the atoms of the non-rational part of the soul. Epicureans could then describe in atomistic terms why when humans think about things that fascinate us, we feel delight. Fruitful reflection can "feel" good; we cannot totally separate thought and sensation. Perhaps Spinoza's picture was correct: every event has both a mental and a material component.^x This is one way of making sense of Epicurus' materialist conception of pleasure.^{xi}

ⁱ For the atomic basis of Epicurus's epistemology and psychology, see Appendix 3, Epicurus: Theory of Perception and Atomism: The Psychological Dimension of Pleasure and Pain.

ⁱⁱ Reading *energeia* as a nominative plural, rather than a dative.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 163.

^{iv} Wolfsdorf, "Epicurus on *Euphrosynê* and *Energeai*," 230-33.

^v The soul (*psyche*) for Aristotle is what gives life, but for Epicurus, it is more specifically the seat of perception and sensation. However, as we have seen, the *psyche* has a rational part situated in the chest and a non-rational part, whose atoms are distributed throughout the body. The rational part involves belief and reason; some emotions entail belief, and are thus rational. Konstan, "Epicurean 'passions' and the Good Life," in *The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics*, 202; Wolfsdorf, 225. Both cite DL X: 66, which locate the rational part of the soul in the chest; a scholiast adds that this is manifest from our fears and joys.

^{vi} Fragment 68, apud Plutarch, *non posse*, 1098d.

^{vii} David Konstan has thus posed an interesting question about mental pleasure. He posits that pleasure is experienced by the non-rational part of the soul; joy by the rational part. What then is the status of *ataraxia*? If pleasure is something that can be experienced by animals without reason, it can be experienced directly by the non-rational atoms of the soul. Konstan argues that the state of *ataraxia*, when the mind is free from anxiety, might also entail a kind of sensible pleasure. Epicurus does not deny that

there may be atoms of the non-rational part of the soul within the chest in which the finer atoms of the rational part are located. Thus, he argues, the pleasure of *ataraxia* is a *hedonê*, which may be experienced by the irrational part of the soul (“Epicurean Happiness,” 27). Not having anxiety might have a physical feeling to it. Depression weighs heavily; freedom from worry and anxiety brings a lightness of being; it is possible that it, too, is experienced physically. However, other scholars, such as David Wolfsdorf, argues that pleasure is not experienced by the non-rational part of the soul alone. Pleasure is the *archê* and telos of the blessed life; the *telos* includes pleasures with a rational component.

^{viii} Cf. Konstan on listening to music, in “Epicurean ‘passions’ and the Good Life,” 197.

^{ix} Madeline Aruffo suggests that one might object that actually joy is diminished when we become aware of it, taking us out of the “flow experience”. While Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi identifies a flow experience in which one loses self-consciousness, there are other meditative states that include a heightened self-awareness.

^x David Glidden challenges this perspective (“Epicurus and the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Greeks and the Good Life* (Fullerton, CA: California State University; Distributed by Hackett, 1980), 177-97. He argues that for Epicurus, a *pathos* was delimited to the sensations of pleasure and pain; “for Epicurus, pleasure, like pain, was itself an experience, rather than an aesthetic perspective on one’s experience (187).” In Glidden’s view, for Epicurus it was identified with an atomic event; it was not a judgment, affected by the ways one mentally frames one’s experience (as it was for the Stoics), but the immediate experience itself. When Epicurus says that memory of pleasant conversation alleviated the physical pain of kidney stones, it is not that he judged the kidney stones less painful, but that the mental pleasure of recollection took over a greater place in his consciousness than the physical pain of the kidney stones.

One might argue that this conflicts with the view Epicurus articulates in Principle Doctrines that the living being cannot be in two states at once; he or she is either in a state of pleasure or pain. Perhaps the mental joy of recollection can bring the being from an overall state of pain to one of pleasure. But the better argument is that the same part of a being cannot be in two states at once. The kidneys may be in pain, but the mind in pleasure, and one can direct more attention to the rational pleasure of the mind than to the physical pain of the kidney. Similarly, when we are being restored from a state of thirst to one of hydration, one part of the organ experiences hydration while another experiences thirst.

Philip Mitsis, in contrast, denies that we can reduce pleasure and pain in Epicurus to the level of physical materialist explanation; Epicurus himself brings in intentional language. See Mitsis, *Epicurus’ Ethical Theory: the Pleasures of Invulnerability* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 46 and note 93; cf. Glidden, 189. Pleasure and pain are two ways of being affected, but human beings can also intentionally intervene in this experience.

^{xi} However, we should allow also for another possibility. Epicurus is not a systematic philosopher in the same way as Aristotle. We have seen that in his use of the term *pathos* he slides from a generic sense to a more restricted, technical sense. Likewise, although he may say that animals experience *hedonê*, while joy is a rational emotion (and thus imply that pleasure is a function of the non-rational soul), he may use the terms somewhat interchangeably. Thus he may not always parse out the precise distinction between

pleasure and joy; he may see the katastematic condition as a fluid conjunction of pleasant experiences of both the rational and non-rational dimensions of the soul.