

Epicurean Ideas of Pleasure and Justice

An answer to the question:

Why does Epicurus think that a life that focuses on pleasure should still be a just (i.e. law abiding) one? Explain why you do, or don't, find his argument convincing.

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As an Egoistic Hedonist¹, Epicurus believes that our lives are centered upon the pursuit of pleasure, and that pleasure is indeed the only worthwhile pursuit (Epicurus (1), pp. 25-26). In a seemingly contradictory notion, however, he stresses the importance of leading a just life, even as personal pleasure is pursued (Epicurus (1), pp.28). This essay will present and defend Epicurus' arguments, and also dispel their apparent ambivalence.

In *Letter to Menoecus*, Epicurus states that when happiness is absent, all available resources are directed toward attaining it (Epicurus(1), pp.25), and thus establishes happiness as life's primary goal. He further argues that the pursuit of personal pleasure is at the root of every choice we make, even if there appear to be other reasons for it on the surface (Epicurus(1), pp.26).

Epicurus' definition of pleasure as it pertains to his arguments is not that of sensual pleasure, but rather "the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul" (Epicurus(1), pp.26). In other words, the ultimate goal in life is the avoidance of physical and mental pain, such as diseases and fear (Epicurus(1), pp.25), the absence of which leads to a pleasurable life. For example, the choice to attend university is made due to the pursuit of personal pleasure. Having a financially lucrative job prevents "pain in the body" due to access to a healthier lifestyle. It also prevents "trouble in the soul" due to minimizing worries about the availability of resources, such as food.

There may be some who disagree with Epicurus' beliefs about personal pleasure as life's true goal, claiming that people perform many selfless acts which do not promote their own happiness. They need only examine these so called "altruistic" behaviours in detail to find truth in Epicurus' idea. For example, an Epicurian might argue that people who give to

¹ Egoistic Hedonism- the ethical theory that achieving one's own happiness is the proper goal of all conduct (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/egoistic+hedonism>).

charity do so only for their own pleasure. He would explain that the act makes them feel good and helpful and comforts their soul, and is not, in truth, performed for the sake of the needy. Such apparently altruistic acts, then, are still performed with the purpose of obtaining selfish pleasure.

According to Epicurus, those who live just lives are free of mental anguish, while those who live unjust lives are plagued by it (Epicurus(2), pp. 27-28). He saw justice, or law, as a “mutually beneficial” (Epicurus(2), pp.28) way of preventing people from causing each other harm. Critics will argue that it is impossible to live a completely perfect, law-abiding life, for some laws are much less important or realistic than others. In response, it is important to note that laws which are no longer beneficial to the people would not be considered just by Epicurus (Epicurus(2), pp.28-29). For example, the bible spends countless chapters discussing crimes and the only way of atoning for them - bringing animal sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem (Leviticus (*VaYikra*), chapter 1-27). The temple no longer exists and most of the laws are no longer relevant. It would be unjust to expect anyone to follow them. An Epicurean might therefore answer that only the relevant, mutually beneficial (and therefore just) laws are included in the notion of a “law abiding” life, not every single law that has ever been written down. An example would be not to commit murder, a law that is always relevant.

The criminal is always anxious that he will be caught, shamed and punished, according to Epicurus: “Even if he has already escaped ten thousand times.... he is never sure that he will not be detected” (Epicurus(2), pp.28). This is precisely the type of mental pain that, according to Epicurus, we seek to avoid during our pursuit of pleasure and happiness.

In the context of pleasure as the absence of mental anguish, therefore, it follows that those who lead unjust lives do not actually lead pleasurable lives in the long term, even if their unjust acts bring them flashes of temporary pleasure (Epicurus, pp.28). There will be those who claim that an unjust life does, indeed, bring more pleasure than a law-abiding one. To them, an Epicurean might present the following argument: a bank robber escaped with a million dollars, but ended up running his entire life, always worried about being found, having to change his name, etc. The temporary pleasure he attained from the money he stole was thus outweighed by the mental anguish he endured for years, causing his unjust life to be, on the whole, unpleasurable. Someone who lives a law abiding life, however, maximizes his pleasure due to the ability to live in the open without fear.

Logically, then, if living unjustly causes mental pain in the form of fear, thus making one's life unpleasurable, such a life is not desirable. Living justly, however, causes one pleasure in the form of the absence of mental pain or even physical pain inflicted during punishment. Therefore, living a just life fulfills our primary goal of living a pleasurable life free of physical and mental pain.

Pursuing pleasure, therefore, need not contradict living a just life – rather, they are one and the same. One should live a just life because one is pursuing pleasure.

Finally, Epicurus' arguments are highly logical. Some might say that Epicurus cares only about selfish pleasures. Correct interpretation of the concept of pleasure as he sees it, however, leads us to conclude that, indeed, every action we take in our life is based on obtaining personal pleasure. This includes acts as apparently altruistic as charity, acts as apparently neutral as choosing to attend university, and acts such as bank robberies, though based on a misguided attempt of obtaining pleasure.

Epicurus makes a clear connection between a just and pleasurable life. Given his realistic understanding of laws as necessarily just, his notion of an honest life is not so grandiose that it is impossible. Given that the absence of anxiety, as well as the absence of punishment, is equal to pleasure, an honest life inevitably leads to a pleasurable one.

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