

Epicureanism: An Ancient Guide to Modern Wellbeing

Submitted by Toby Oliver Max Sherman, to the University of Exeter as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Philosophy, September 2017.

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I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Toby Sherman

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Abbreviations

Ar. Did. = Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*

Ath. = Atheneus, *The Dinner Sophists*

Cic. = Cicero:

 Fin. = *On Ends*

 Tusc. = *Tusculan Disputations*

D.L. = Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Epict. = Epictetus:

 Ench. = *Enchiridion*

 Fr. = *Fragments*

 Gnom. = *Discourses*

Epic. = Epicurus:

 Ep. Hdt. = *Letter to Herodotus*

 Ep. Men. = *Letter to Menoecus*

 L.D. = *Leading Doctrines*

 V.C. = *Vatican Collection of Aphorisms*

Lucr. = Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

Oec. = Philodemus, *On Property Management*

Sen. Ep. = Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the question of what wellbeing consists in, and how well Epicureanism answers that question. In the first part, I compare some modern approaches to wellbeing: desire-satisfaction, objective-list theories, and hedonism. I reject the objective-list approach and accept that desire-satisfactionism is an accurate and useful account of what wellbeing is. However, desire-satisfaction is not basic and can be reduced to hedonism, which is what wellbeing actually consists in. I then reject attitudinal hedonism in favour of a sensational-pleasure definition.

In the second part, I turn to Epicureanism in an attempt to solve some the difficulties that arise from modern hedonistic theories. I set out the main components of Epicurean ethical theory (pleasure, pain, virtue and desire) and clarify and defend my interpretation of them. I defend the view that Epicurus was a pure consequentialist who considered virtue and the careful selection of desires to be valuable only to the extent that they contribute to a pleasant state of feeling. I also support the view that Epicurus considered the absence of pain to be the absolute limit of pleasure.

Finally, I argue that Epicurus is correct in his view, and demonstrate how pleasure cannot be increased past this point. I give an account of how perfect pleasure is varied but not increased beyond painlessness. As a result of this, I conclude that the perfectionist Epicurean approach to pleasure will result in a greater attainment of wellbeing than modern accumulative approaches.

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Introduction

1

Goals of this thesis

In this thesis I want to explore the notion of wellbeing. What does it mean for us to 'be well?' Wellbeing has been argued to consist of a number of different things – pleasure, satisfaction, virtue, some combination of some or all of these, or something separate entirely. Some hold that wellbeing can only be possessed by the morally good, others that it can be had by the worst villains. It may be distributed by pure chance or it may be fully within the control of the subject themselves. These and other questions have been central to the philosophical discussion of wellbeing.

There has been a recent revival of ancient Greek and Roman theories of wellbeing. These theories tend to be holistic in nature, and to link happiness and contentment with virtuous living. Stoicism in particular, has enjoyed huge popularity – thanks in no small measure to the control and resistance it offers against the confusing temptations of modern life. Epicureanism, by contrast, has not experienced such a resurgence. This may be because Epicureanism is a hedonistic theory, and hedonism has evolved. Modern hedonism, particularly utilitarianism, has developed a rich tradition of its own, so there hasn't been so much felt *need* to bring back ancient hedonism. In this paper, however, I want to argue that not only is hedonism the best theory of wellbeing, but that Epicureanism is the most theoretically adequate and practically useful of hedonistic theories.

However, I hope to do more than equate wellbeing with pleasure. Pleasure itself is a vast and diverse landscape – we have physical pleasures, mental pleasures, selfish pleasures, social pleasures, pleasures of memory, pleasures of anticipation, pleasure in sensations and pleasure in states of affairs. Merely asserting that we are better off if we have more pleasure does not offer us much guidance in how to live. For that, we need to know how to rate pleasures – should we pursue quality or quantity? Are all pleasures good, or can some be damaging to wellbeing, either in hedonic terms or for some external reason? We must know if some of the other concepts standardly connected with wellbeing – virtue, satisfaction, and so on, have any real bearing on our welfare and, if so, whether that is because those things are instrumental to happiness or because they have some independent value. Most of all, we need a strategy for acquiring wellbeing.

It could be argued that this is not the business of philosophy. If philosophy's jurisdiction ends at conceptual analysis, then it is enough to establish that wellbeing is

pleasure; discovering sources and strategies of pleasure is the realm of psychology, biology and life-coaching. This division does not exist, however, within the ancient approaches. Epicurus and his contemporaries *lived* their philosophies, of which strategy and psychology are integral parts.¹ If we are to follow their example, defining wellbeing is simply not enough. We must at least *attempt* to discover the best way to live our lives – the way that provides the most wellbeing.

This best strategy is, I think, the one proposed by Epicurus. If wellbeing is pleasure, and pleasure alone (which I hope to prove), then his approach to the achievement of wellbeing is the most effective: prioritising the most enduring pleasure – peace of mind² – and structuring one’s life and desires to ensure it. In order to demonstrate the practical effectiveness of the Epicurean philosophy, I will have to do more than link pleasure, or even specifically Epicurean pleasure, with wellbeing. I will have to show that the methods recommended by Epicurus – adapting our own desires, beliefs and actions – are genuinely effective both in specific situations and in life as a whole at achieving wellbeing.

2 Structure of the Argument

2.1 Theories of Wellbeing

Epicurus was a hedonist: he believed that wellbeing consisted in pleasure, and nothing but pleasure. Therefore, before we can think of reviving Epicureanism as a philosophy of life, we need to establish the truth of hedonism more generally. Here, I examine the various theories of wellbeing current in modern philosophical discussion – desire-satisfactionism, hedonism, and ‘objective-list’ theories – with a view to vindicating hedonism against its rivals. Hedonism, I argue, can accommodate all of our everyday intuitions about the importance of dispositions, of knowledge, and of the virtues, without departing from its own guiding principles.

Hedonism, however, takes many forms, depending on how one analyses the concept of pleasure. Some modern philosophers, including Chris Heathwood and Fred Feldman, think of pleasure as a propositional attitude: to experience pleasure is to be ‘pleased *that*’ p. If this were true, it would be bad news for Epicureanism, which conceives of pleasure as a sensation, not an attitude. But it is not true. Pleasure is a sensation,

¹ Hadot, P. (2003) pp. 58

² O’Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 118

though not a determinate one, as Roger Crisp has convincingly demonstrated.

Most modern hedonists think of pleasure as something positive, that can be added to indefinitely. This has implications for how we should go about maximising pleasure; it suggests that we might be best off seeking out endless new experiences, cultivating endless new desires. Epicurus conceived of pleasure very differently, as the absence or removal of pain, which led him to very different practical conclusions. It is time modern hedonists gave his proposals serious consideration.

2.2 Epicureanism

The philosophy of Epicurus survives only in fragments, and in the reports (often hostile) of commentators. The following thesis is not a work of original historical scholarship. I will instead be working from accepted translations of the original works of Epicurus, Lucretius and others, especially Epicurus' letters and the Principle Doctrines, as the purest source of Epicurean beliefs and strategies. The letter to Menoeceus, in particular, sets out the complete framework of Epicurus' ethical theory, and I will use this as the central pillar of my interpretation of his views on pleasure, desire and the good life. Epicurus and his arguments are also dealt with by Cicero and Diogenes Laertius, although these sources should be treated with caution, as they were written without a full complement of sympathy for the man or his theories.

In addition to original works, I will be utilizing various secondary studies of Epicureanism, including those of O'Keefe³, Annas⁴, Nussbaum⁵, Nikolsky⁶, Woolf⁷ and Hershenov⁸. The distinctiveness of my own interpretation can best be brought out by means of two contrasts. Unlike Julia Annas, who interprets Epicurus as a eudaimonist after the fashion of Aristotle and the Stoics, I treat Epicurus as a consequentialist who identified happiness with pleasant states of mind. In this sense, I regard Epicureanism as closer in structure to modern utilitarianism than to most other ancient ethical theories. However, Epicureanism does differ in one crucial respect to all forms of modern hedonism, in that it treats pleasure as strictly negative or privative: pleasure is simply the absence or removal of pain. Here,

³ O'Keefe, T. (2012)

⁴ Annas, J. (1995)

⁵ Nussbaum, M. (1999)

⁶ Nikolsky, B. (2001)

⁷ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 158-178.

⁸ Hershenov, D. (2007) pp. 236

my reading departs from that of Hershenov and Woolf, both of whom try to find a place in Epicureanism for a positive conception of pleasure, thus obscuring one of its most intriguing and attractive features.

The interpretation of Epicurean ethics offered here is, I believe, consistent with the surviving sources, but does not depend upon the particular physical and metaphysical theories with which Epicureanism, in its historical form, was bound up. I would like to extract those systems from the historical context respected to varying levels by these authors and test their ability to make sense within our modern understanding of the world. If Epicureanism is to work for us today, its principles must be able to survive outside the framework of metaphysical and physical assumptions that make up the ancient world view.

2.3 The Limits of Pleasure

In the final section of this thesis, I return to the question flagged up at the end of section 1: is pleasure best conceived of as a positive sensation in its own right, which can be intensified indefinitely, or is it best conceived as Epicurus conceived it, as the absence or removal of pain? I make a case (persuasive, not conclusive) for the Epicurean view, by removing some of oddities and obscurities that stand in the way of its acceptance. In particular, I show that pleasure can be remedial, not for particular pains, but for pain-in-general, which is why it often seems to be not remedial at all. And I argue that, once we have grasped how rare and extraordinary the Epicurean ideal of complete painlessness is, we will be more open to the suggestion that it cannot be bettered by further experiences of positive pleasure.

Part 1:

Modern Theories of Wellbeing

3

What is wellbeing? How should we define it?

The term 'wellbeing' is standardly used by philosophers to describe whatever it is that makes a person's life go well *for* that person – as opposed to for others, or in some abstract sense. Before we look at particular theories of wellbeing, we should briefly consider what we want a successful theory to provide.

Larry Sumner outlines two strategies for evaluating theories of welfare or wellbeing. The first tests for what he calls normative adequacy: we presuppose a particular theoretical framework and see how well the theory in question plays the predetermined role. Sumner calls this normative adequacy because the presupposed framework tends to be normative in nature, either along rational or moral lines⁹.

Sumner provides this example: let's say our presupposed theoretical framework is an egalitarian theory of social justice: it is right that things are equally distributed. Our framework also includes welfarism – welfare is what is important. We then compare various theories, always with reference to our goal of egalitarian distribution. When we decide that, say, resources need to be equally distributed, our definition of welfare is formed. We decide, firstly, that justice is equality of welfare and then, secondly, that welfare is ownership of resources. This definition of welfare looks like the best possible theory because it fits so well into the egalitarian and welfarist framework we have assumed¹⁰. If we had assumed a different theoretical framework, we might conclude that welfare is pleasure or satisfied desire or something else.

Sumner's criticism of this normative approach is that the identification of welfare as distribution of resources is entirely predetermined by the beliefs that a) something should be distributed equally and b) that something must be what welfare is. At no point, however, has welfare been considered in itself. This elegant theory about equal distribution of

⁹ Sumner, L.W. (1996) pp. 8

¹⁰ pp. 10

resources may not be a theory of welfare at all.

Sumner suggests that we should try to define welfare independently of normative value considerations. Rather, we should evaluate possible definitions by their *descriptive* accuracy – how well they accord with ‘the prodigious variety our preanalytic convictions.’¹¹ For this to work, of course, we need to actually have a preanalytic idea of welfare. For Sumner, this idea is made up of, or demonstrated by, the extensive matrix of everyday judgements, intuitive assessments and rich vocabulary of terms: benefit, advantage, good, ill, etc. A theory of welfare is accurate if it tallies with these pre-analytic notions; otherwise it is not a theory of welfare at all, but of something else.

This normatively neutral approach requires us to pay careful attention to our pre-analytic intuitions and judgements. The core intuitions we all share need to be held on to: they are essential to any theory of wellbeing. The more uncertain peripheries of wellbeing – those places where our intuitions are tentative and divided - don’t provide the same match requirements, and have to be carefully reconstructed, perhaps on the basis of normative considerations.

I accept Sumner’s requirement of descriptive adequacy, though I disagree with him on what wellbeing actually is. In this chapter, I assess the three dominant modern approaches to wellbeing: desire-satisfactionism, hedonism, and ‘objective list’ theories. I make the case for hedonism, though I believe that there is a problem for hedonism as standardly formulated, which I touch on briefly at the end.

4

Desire Satisfactionism

Where does wellbeing lie? A group of philosophical theories suggest that the answer might lie in getting what we want. If two people want the same things, and only one of them attains those things, there seems to be some ground for supposing that he is better off than the person who does not attain them. Similarly, two people in identical states of affairs might be supposed to have different levels of wellbeing on the basis that only one of them *wants* this state of affairs. On the face of it, this approach appears somewhat similar to the Whole-Life-Satisfaction theory employed by some economists and

¹¹Sumner, L.W. (1996) pp. 11

psychologists, but with a crucial difference: instead of a single desire – that one's life as a whole is going in a certain way – this approach allows consideration of all desires, fleeting or permanent, desperate or whimsical.

Before we adopt desire-satisfactionism as a theory of wellbeing, we want to be sure that the satisfaction of desire is both necessary and sufficient for wellbeing. To give this approach a fair shot, we must come up with the strongest possible formulation, and that raises some difficult questions. Do all desires count? Is it better to have a greater total quantity of satisfied desires or to have a higher ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied desires? Should we count the desires we actually have or the desires we should have?

The deepest divide found amongst versions of desire-satisfactionism is between those that define wellbeing in terms of the satisfaction of our actual desires and those that focus on the satisfaction of those desires that we ideally would have. On the one hand there is the common-sense view that those of us who get what we actually want are going to be better off than those who don't. On the other, there is the possibility that our actual desires are not to be trusted and that it is obtaining the things we ought to want that determines our wellbeing.

Let us take the actual-desire approach first. Fred wants to eat chocolate. Fred eats chocolate. Fred is happy. This is an everyday example of an actual satisfied desire resulting in an improvement in wellbeing. Problems occur when we introduce more problematic desires. There seem to be plenty of occasions where people get what they want but are no better off.

Let us imagine that in this particular case, Fred's desire is for a spoonful of deliciously crunchy peanut butter. He has never had peanut butter before, but it looks good, so Fred wants it. However, Fred is sadly ignorant of his violent peanut allergy and, upon attaining the object of his desire, suffers a near-fatal anaphylactic shock. Fred got what he wanted, but due to his ignorance of his condition, satisfying his ill-informed desire actually made him much worse off.

This sort of event is not that uncommon, and it throws some serious doubt on the hypothesis that getting what we want makes our lives go better. Add to this the many occasions where we desire things that make us unhealthy or ashamed and we need to be very hesitant about equating all satisfied desires with an increase in wellbeing.

To resolve this issue, the desire-satisfactionist has a few options. James Griffin considers many actual desires misguided. Often, we mistake our own interests and desire

things that make us no better off.¹² Griffin thinks that we should count towards wellbeing only the satisfaction of those desires that fulfil certain criteria, i.e. only those which are rational and informed.

The obvious advantage of approaches that count each and every desire we have is that such desires are easily discernible, they are real, and they are our own; thus we are protected from any form of paternalism that might seek to dictate what we should and should not want¹³. On the other hand, we can see that our actual desires, authentic and real as they may be, can sometimes be misguided. We want things that don't make us better off, so perhaps we should consider shifting towards ideal desires, even if that would risk a loss of autonomy. Griffin himself prefers to separate autonomy and well-being - autonomy is morally significant, but whether or not an account increases or supports autonomy has no bearing on how successful it is as an account of well-being. We should leave the problem of autonomy for now and concentrate fully on whether our well-being itself consists in the satisfaction of our actual desires or only those desires we consider to be rational or informed¹⁴.

One type of desire that Griffin wishes to rule out is that which exists *only* in an ideal situation. He would prefer we restrict ourselves to those desires that fulfil the rationality criteria *and* are actually felt.¹⁵ I think that Griffin's restriction is a sensible one, and that it can be demonstrated that there is no benefit in the satisfaction of desires that are not actually felt.

Let us say that Katie does not have any desire for Hans, an ill man on the other side of the world, to get better. This is not awfully heartless of her, since she has no knowledge of his existence. The desire for Hans' recovery can probably be considered ideal: it is rational, and it fits in with all of Katie's benevolent attitudes towards strangers. This is a desire she would certainly have if only she weren't ignorant of the man's existence. Luckily, Hans does indeed recover. Katie's ideal desire is fulfilled. This does not, of course, make the slightest bit of difference to Katie – it does not bring her any joy or improve her wellbeing in any way.

It seems sensible, then, to include an actual-desire condition: the satisfaction of purely ideal desires – desires that we would ideally have, but actually do not – does not make us better off. Now we must settle what it is that distinguishes desires that are actual

¹² Griffin, J. (1986) pp. 10

¹³ pp. 10

¹⁴ pp. 11

¹⁵ pp. 11

and rational from the sort of actual but foolish desires we wish to avoid. Pursuing every desire without evaluation is hardly likely to lead to a better life, so we need some criteria by which to expose faulty or unworthy desires.

Griffin claims only the satisfaction of informed and rational desires counts towards well-being. The first criteria a desire has to fulfil is that the information that it is based on should be correct. This makes a lot of sense – wanting to have a large and well-furnished house, because we believe (mistakenly) that this will win us the respect of our peers, is just the sort of erroneous desire we want to eliminate. In this particular example, it is clear why correct information is so important. The desire for the house is an instrumental desire: the house isn't wanted in itself, but in order to achieve something that is wanted for itself – respect.

The objects of instrumental desires are wanted not for themselves, but because we believe that their possession will lead to something we do desire for itself, something intrinsically valuable. In other words, we don't want the objects of instrumental desires because we have made some sort of normative judgement about those objects, but because our understanding of the way the world works is that, once the instrumentally desired state of affairs is achieved, the intrinsically desired one is certain (or likely) to follow. In the example of the expensive house, the buyer's desire (provided they only want the house for the respect they will gain) is entirely dependent on the belief that the house and the respect of their friends is causally connected. If the causal relationship turns out to be false – if, say, the friends in question simply aren't impressed by the ostentatious bathroom – then the link between extrinsic and intrinsic desires is severed, and the first is satisfied without the second. Since only the object of the *intrinsic* desire is desired for itself, this means that the extrinsic desire has been satisfied but there has been no increase in wellbeing.

This underlines the importance of correct information when it comes to instrumental desires. No matter what the intrinsic desire is, a faulty understanding of psychology, physics or society can be a source of instrumental desires that won't actually contribute, when satisfied, towards the fulfilling of any intrinsic desire. We therefore have two options. We could elect only to count towards wellbeing the satisfaction of those instrumental desires that are based on true information. Alternatively, we could ignore instrumental desires altogether and say that only satisfied intrinsic desires contribute to wellbeing. Since the information quality of instrumental desires is determined by how well they in fact contribute to the satisfaction of intrinsic desires (in the house example, not at all), these two options come to the same thing. For simplicity's sake, however, it makes sense to

restrict our enquiry to intrinsic desires – only the satisfaction of intrinsic desires has the power to increase wellbeing.

It's not just factual information that can be faulty. According to Griffin, the informed-desire account allows that some desires may be more valuable than others depending on the concepts and values on which they are based.¹⁶ Let us say that our socialite from earlier was correct and his tasteless new mansion does indeed impress his fawning and envious associates. The intrinsic desire is fulfilled, and all factual information was correct. However, the desire is based on less-than-ideal values, i.e. that impressing others is a worthwhile goal in its own right. As well as the empirical facts being spot-on, a fully informed desire must be based on a good understanding of what is best for the one who desires. The requirements of the informed-desire approach include, says Griffin, both factual and normative information: 'namely, ... understanding completely what makes life go well.'¹⁷

The informed-desire account seems to be drifting further and further from the intuitive 'getting-what-you-want' appeal of desire-satisfactionism. For a person to be judged happy and well-off, they must satisfy desires that they actually have and that are founded not only on impeccable factual information but also on a perfect comprehension of the human good. That's rather a tall order. Presumably, if wellbeing is only determined by satisfaction of such desires, then a great many people completely lack well-being because none of their desires fit the criteria. It may be more generous to take the information requirements as a continuum: just as the person with more fulfilled desires is better-off than a person with less, so is the person with more factually and ethically informed desires.

However, there seems to be more to this account than just satisfying our desires. According to this approach, only certain desires count, and it is possible that the desire element is not the most important factor. Imagine a person, Jill, whose desires are very well-informed in every sense. Jill forms her desires based on perfectly accurate factual information about the world. She also has very clear ideas about what is most valuable – let us say a state of perfect peace of mind, moral integrity and bodily comfort. Jill has satisfied her desires for these things and feels very happy. Jack, on the other hand, has also gotten everything he wants and is very happy, but due to his faulty values, what he wants happens to be an astonishing score on Pac-Man. Is the vital difference here really the *quality* of Jack's and Jill's desires? Or is it rather that, although they both have what

¹⁶ Griffin, J. (1986) pp. 12

¹⁷ pp. 12

they want, Jill possesses something good, this state of tranquillity and virtue, and that Jack doesn't? The informed account seems to be saying that there are some things that we *ought* to desire because they are desirable, and that getting these things makes us well-off – and that's much closer to some kind of objective list theory than to desire-satisfactionism. True, actual desire for these things is also required, but that can simply be another item on the list of required goods.

If we want to argue that what makes life go well is getting what we desire, the desire element really should take centre stage. We want to say that not all desires are equal, but if we have to bring in external criteria of 'objective desirability' to rate our desires, we've strayed too far from what originally made the desire-satisfaction account appealing. We need to find a way to evaluate desires within the framework of desire without calling on other values.

4.1

Subjective desire satisfaction

Chris Heathwood proposes a theory of wellbeing called 'subjective desire-satisfactionism', or more precisely 'concurrent intrinsic desire satisfactionism'. This suggests that a one is made better off if one gets something one wants for its own sake at the moment that one wants it¹⁸. This formulation avoids some of the problems that can afflict other desire-satisfactionist theories, such as the case of getting something you used to want now that you no longer want it, or getting something you want only because it would be instrumental for attaining something else. Heathwood's formulation also allows us to include things one only wants once they have started happening, rather than desired in advance.

The key points that distinguish Heathwood's theory are, firstly, that desires can be evaluated without reference to non-desire-related criteria (like correct information) and, secondly, that satisfaction should be measured subjectively – the subject must *believe* the desire is satisfied, regardless of whether it actually *is*.

Unlike the informed-desire approach, Heathwood places no restriction on which satisfied desires increase wellbeing: any instance of (subjective) desire satisfaction is, in itself, good for the subject. This has the obvious advantage of avoiding any accusation of

¹⁸ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 542

paternalism and clearly does not deviate from desire-satisfaction as the central and only value. Unfortunately, it brings with it the problem that the informed approach was designed to avoid: how do we decide which desires to fulfil? If all satisfaction is conducive to wellbeing, does that mean we ought to satisfy desires that are dangerous or disastrous?

Heathwood's solution is to evaluate desires not intrinsically (by some feature of the desire itself, such as its rationality or information-accuracy), but extrinsically (by what results from that desire being fulfilled).¹⁹ Instrumental desires, such as wanting a house in order to impress friends, can be evaluated according to how well they achieve the intrinsic desire when satisfied. An intrinsic desire, in turn, can be evaluated on whether its satisfaction leads to a more or less favourable balance of satisfactions over frustrations. Satisfaction and frustration are the only factors that decide a) if a satisfied desire is a good one, and b) if a person is well- or badly-off. Compared to the informed approach, Heathwood's is pleasingly parsimonious, reading like a desire-satisfaction version of Bentham's calculus (particularly with its inclusion of what Bentham calls 'fecundity' and 'purity' – that is, the likelihood of being followed by further positive effects and unlikelihood of being accompanied by negative effects).

This approach offers a possible solution to the troublesome contradiction between saying that fulfilling desires is intrinsically good and contributes to wellbeing and the everyday observation that pursuing some desires does us harm. Heathwood distinguishes between intrinsic goodness and all-things-considered goodness. Every satisfied desire is intrinsically good, but only those desires which result in more total satisfaction than total frustration are all-things considered good. Heathwood gives the example of wanting to drink from a polluted river. This desire is defective and should not be satisfied because, although drinking the water would satisfy the desire and therefore be intrinsically good, it would lead to the much greater frustrations of sickness²⁰.

In addition to the problem of fulfilled yet dissatisfied people, Heathwood brings up another difficulty for desire-satisfactionism, and one that serves as a traditional objection to such theories: the paradoxical case of the person who wishes to be badly off. The objection is simple – the person wants to be badly-off and they are badly-off. Their desire is fulfilled, and they are miserable. Therefore, it must be false that wellbeing equals having one's desires fulfilled.²¹

Not so fast, says Heathwood. This objection relies on a fundamental error about the

¹⁹ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 546

²⁰ pp. 547

²¹ pp. 543

very nature of wellbeing, and thus fails to disprove the desire-satisfaction theory. It misses the point that misery, boredom and other negative feelings involve a wish that things should be different to how they, in fact, are. It doesn't make any sense to say that the miserable person is getting everything they want: the misery they feel is the result of a mass of desire frustrations (such as desiring not to be cold, or in pain, or bored, or of desiring any number of positive things that aren't happening to them). Heathwood accepts that the fulfilled desire to be badly-off *does* make the subject better off, but 'the satisfaction of this desire to be badly off must, of necessity, count for less, in terms of welfare, than all the daily frustrations he racks up. If it were otherwise, then the man wouldn't be badly off, and the desire to be badly off would no longer be satisfied²².'

In other words, the happiness resulting from the successfully fulfilled desire to be miserable is not enough to make the subject happy overall, so the paradox is avoided. It is enough, however, to make the person who wants to be miserable better-off than an otherwise equally miserable person who doesn't want to be miserable, which seems intuitively right. If we apply this reasoning to the example of the gluttonous Fred from earlier, we could say that his getting his taste of peanut butter does indeed make him slightly better-off, but this is vastly outweighed by the frustration of his much stronger desire to not suffer from near-fatal medical problems.

Heathwood's account of wellbeing gives us a plausible explanation of why some people are well-off and others badly-off. However, it offers very little guidance for someone who wishes to increase their welfare. We know that we should make sure our desires are fulfilled as long as that doesn't, in turn, result in a greater frustration of other desires. What we do not yet have are any practical tools for determining which desires would result in a positive balance of satisfaction over frustration and which desires would undermine that balance. I return to this problem later, when I consider the advantages of Epicureanism.

4.2

State-of-mind and state-of-the-world

Heathwood offers us a concise and straightforward concept of the good life: one in which total satisfactions outweigh total frustrations, even if this means accepting a small frustration in the present for a greater satisfaction down the line. A question, however,

²² Heathwood, C. (2006) pp.544

remains: does a desire actually have to be satisfied, or does it merely have to be believed to be? On the one hand, we have the view that the actual satisfaction, regardless of the subject's beliefs about the matter, is everything.²³ On the other, there is opposite view, championed by Heathwood, in which the actual satisfaction is completely irrelevant – the belief is everything.²⁴

Griffin refers to these alternatives as state-of-mind and state-of-the-world theories. Heathwood's subjective desire-satisfactionism would clearly come under the former label: wellbeing is the state of mind we have when we *think* we have gotten what we want. Griffin's concern is that this may be too narrow a definition: we desire some things other than states of mind. 'If a father wants his children to be happy, what he wants, what is valuable to him, is a state of the world, not a state of his mind; merely to delude him into thinking that his children flourish, therefore, does not give him what he values.'²⁵ Griffin also says that 'the informed-desire account does not require that fulfilment of desire translates itself in every case into the experience of the person who has the desire, and that is what gives the account its breadth and attraction as a theory of what makes life valuable.'²⁶ This suggests the possibility that the father would be better off if his children flourished but was himself ignorant of the fact. The desire-satisfaction account can thus avoid the restriction to states of mind. Griffin calls the requirement that all satisfactions be experienced the 'Experience Requirement' and suggests we would do well to drop it.

While dropping the Experience Requirement seems to have these advantages, Griffin notes it also brings problems. It allows wellbeing to be affected by things we are unaware of - 'that seems right: if you cheat me out of an inheritance that I never expected, I might not know but still be worse off for it'²⁷ – but also, more problematically, things which don't affect our lives in any way. We could desire something to happen a hundred years from now, or on the other side of the world, but it seems implausible to say that the fulfilment of such desires makes us better-off. Hence the problem: without the Experience Requirement, the things that can affect our wellbeing are too broad, but with it they are too narrow.

Let us imagine two situations and ask in which the most wellbeing lies. Romeo desires more than anything that Juliet lives. In A) she is indeed alive, but poor Romeo has

²³ Griffin, J. (1986) pp. 13

²⁴ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 548

²⁵ Griffin, J. (1986) pp. 13

²⁶ pp. 14

²⁷ pp. 16

been told that she is dead. In B) Juliet is dead, but Romeo does not know this. For the sake of fairness, we should assume that both deceptions are perfect and will never be discovered. Also, let us leave aside for the moment the rest of Romeo's life and focus only who is better off *now*: Romeo A or Romeo B. Romeo B clearly believes he is better off, while Romeo A has actually gotten what he wants. In reality, Romeo A would probably discover the error and go on to be more satisfied, unless he goes and does something rash, but if this perfect deception went on for ever, it is hard to find grounds for Romeo A being better off in any way. What does it benefit him that his Juliet is alive? It makes no difference to him at all. Similarly, what does it matter that Romeo B is in error? He is, subjectively, well-off because he believes he has what he wants.

With the Experience Requirement in place, Romeo B must be better off. The death of Juliet B and the survival of Juliet A are not experienced by the Romeos, and therefore have no bearing on their well-being. If we drop the Experience Requirement we get a different result. Romeo A's wellbeing is increased by Juliet's actual survival, which presumably outweighs (because it is the most important thing) the frustrations of grieving. Romeo B's wellbeing is decreased by the unknown frustration of his desire for Juliet to be alive, outweighing any *experienced* satisfactions. Without the Experience Requirement, the Romeo who is in despair is overall well-off because of unknown factors, while the joyous Romeo is badly-off for the same reason. On the assumption that neither deception is ever discovered, this makes no sense at all. It cannot be the case that someone believes all their life that they are well-off while, due to a factor that makes no subjective difference to them at all, they are in fact very badly-off. It is absurd to come up with a definition of wellbeing that places prime importance on something that is completely imperceptible to the subject, especially if this is a definition concerned with satisfaction of our desires. In reality, of course it is important whether Juliet lives or not, but this importance can easily be explained by things that *do* fall under the experience requirement, i.e. the life Romeo would be able to lead with her if she were living, his joy at discovering that she is not dead, and so on. Experience clearly does make a difference to well-being.

The further question is whether experience is *sufficient* for wellbeing. Griffin thinks not – we need to actually get what we want, not just think we do. As we have explained, however, the only way the actual satisfaction of our desires can affect us is in its potentiality to affect the likelihood of our *subjective* satisfaction. Griffin points out that we desire states of the world, not states of mind, but that does not in any way prevent our wellbeing from coming from beliefs (which are states of mind) *about* the state of the

world.²⁸

We have established that the satisfaction that adds value to life is the subjective, experienced kind. Satisfactions that are ideal only, or which are actual but not experienced, do not affect our wellbeing, and this implies that wellbeing is itself subjective: being well is the same as *believing* or *feeling* that we are well. The notion that one might be, in fact, well, but unaware of that fact is extraordinarily counter-intuitive: to call a person well who is sad or frustrated or unfulfilled is entirely contrary to our intuitive notions of wellbeing.

The reverse is much more plausible, however. It seems reasonable to suppose that there are many people who believe they are well-off but are mistaken, and in fact are missing something of value. Under a subjective version of desire-satisfactionism, this situation cannot arise: if a person considers themselves to be satisfied, and therefore well-off, then they are. This appears to be a problem with the subjective view: it seems that we can't criticise hopelessly deluded people who are leading potentially damaging or disastrous lives. This is where Heathwood's method of judging desires extrinsically comes in handy. As outlined above, a completely subjective account of wellbeing *does* explain why deluded lives are not desirable: while they may be satisfying now, they are very likely to result in a greater subjective balance of frustration over satisfaction in the future. Therefore, we can say that someone who is subjectively satisfied must be well-off, but at the same time acknowledge that they may be may not be for long.

Our aim is to find an adequate definition of wellbeing and a guide to achieving it. So far, our best formulation is that wellbeing consists of having a favourable balance of subjectively satisfied intrinsic desires over subjectively frustrated intrinsic desires. In terms of guidance, we ought to satisfy those desires that are likely to bring about this balance and ignore desires that would result in the reverse. This seems plausible – no doubt a great many people follow this exact reasoning, at least when they can rein in the compulsion to satisfy a desire now, no matter what the consequences are for our long-term satisfaction. However, there are problems with this formulation.

4.3

Problems for desire-satisfactionism

²⁸ Griffin, J. (1986) pp. 16

The subjectively experienced satisfaction of desire does seem to be importantly connected to wellbeing; on the whole, getting what we want makes us better off. However, this is not enough to allow us to *define* wellbeing as satisfied desire. I argue that the correlation between satisfied desire and wellbeing is strong, but not perfect: wellbeing can be increased without the satisfaction of desire. Satisfying desire has great instrumental value in the pursuit of wellbeing, but wellbeing actually consists of something else: pleasure.

The flaws in desire-satisfactionism are highlighted by Fred Feldman. It is worth noting that Feldman opposes desire-satisfactionism as a theory of *happiness*, not *wellbeing*. However, since Feldman goes on to identify happiness and wellbeing, this is not crucially important.²⁹ My definition of wellbeing diverges from Feldman's, but the problems he identifies with desire-satisfactionism as a theory of happiness apply equally well to it as a theory of subjective wellbeing. The version Feldman opposes, from Wayne Davis, states that (in Feldman's own words)

A's momentary happiness level at t = the sum, for all propositions P that A is thinking at t, of the products of the degree to which A believe P at t and the degree to which A intrinsically desires P at t.³⁰

Or, more simply, happiness is wanting something and believing that we are getting it. The more we want it and the stronger our belief, the happier we are. Since we have accepted the experience requirement, this accurately captures what we mean by a satisfied desire. Where this account of happiness fails, according to Feldman, is that wanting something to be true and believing that it is true is a *common cause* of happiness but does not *constitute* happiness. This can be demonstrated, he says, by examples in which happiness and desire satisfaction diverge³¹.

For this purpose, Feldman presents the case of Susan. Susan wants to complete her dissertation but doesn't believe she will. She is despondent. She lacks both desire satisfaction and happiness, which so far is in keeping with the desire satisfaction account. However, this changes when her doctor prescribes her mood-altering drugs which cheer her up. Susan now smiles more, is less irritable and, if asked, would say she felt happy. By all these accounts, Susan is now happier than she was before, although her desires and beliefs have remained the same: she is just as unsatisfied. In the reverse example, Glum

²⁹ Feldman, F. (2010) pp. 160-161

³⁰ pp. 60

³¹ pp. 63

is treated by a counsellor and his beliefs change so that he thinks his desires are being fulfilled, but he remains just as depressed as before³².

With these examples, Feldman aims to show that desire satisfaction and our level of happiness/wellbeing can be altered independently of one another and are therefore not identical. Although there is clearly a link between the two, Feldman thinks it is a contingent one, which means that happiness ought not to be *defined* as desire satisfaction. In Susan's case, it does seem difficult to argue that she is *in no way* happier or better off after the pills. What remains is to determine if this effect is genuinely independent of desire satisfaction as Feldman claims. If we follow Heathwood's account of the nature of pleasure and displeasure we come to a different conclusion: the misery experienced by Susan-before-pill (S1) was in fact made up of frustrated desires that must be missing from Susan-after-pill (S2). But what desires might those be? Consider the following two proposals. Either

A) Happiness consists in satisfied desires. Susan desires to feel good. S1 has this desire frustrated and S2 has this desire satisfied, so S2 is happy and S1 is not.

or

B) Happiness consists in feeling good. S1 does not feel good but S2 does, so S2 is happy and S1 is not.

In both cases, Susan's shift from not feeling good to feeling good explains her changing from a state of not being happy to a state of being happy. The key to determining which explanation is most preferable is our interpretation of what it means for Susan to 'feel good'. If we follow desire-satisfactionism, then feeling good is the state of mind of having one's desires satisfied. But then, A) looks worryingly circular: Susan 'desires to feel good' means that she desires to have her desires fulfilled.

Alternatively, good-feeling is a particular sensation. However, if that is the case, B) describes the difference in Susan completely, without unnecessary reference to desires. Clearly it is the good feeling, the sensation, which makes the difference here, and does so *in itself*, not because it is desired.

We still need to determine what role satisfied desires play when it comes to

³² Feldman, F. (2010) pp. 66

happiness. If Feldman is right, the connection is contingent and instrumental: it just so happens that fulfilling a desire very often (but as the examples show, not always) results in happiness. If we accept B), this is explained as:

Happiness consists in feeling good. Satisfying desires very often makes us feel good. Therefore, satisfying desires very often makes us happy.

This formulation captures the strong causal correlation between satisfying desires and happiness, and also explains (through the contingency of the satisfaction-feel good connection) why desire satisfaction and happiness can sometimes change independently of one another. In Susan's case, the pill made her feel good (and therefore made her happy) without affecting her desires at all. This could happen because, although satisfying desires is a (or the) major cause of good feeling, it is not the only one. In Susan's case, the chemicals in the pill have done the job directly.

This would mean that the fundamental constituents of wellbeing are not satisfaction and frustration, but good- and ill-feeling: pleasure and pain. Although desire-satisfaction theory provides valuable insight into why getting what we want often makes our life go well, it seems that to really understand what wellbeing is and how to attain it, we must turn to hedonism.

5

Hedonism

Pleasure, then, would seem to be the basic constituent of wellbeing. Hedonism has been championed and maligned in equal measure through the ages, but we must decide whether or not, for our purpose, it offers the best possible theory of wellbeing. In its most primitive form, hedonism is the view that wellbeing consists in the enjoyment of sensory pleasure and the avoidance of sensory pain. Such behaviour can be easily observed in animals and children, and this may be why some have tried to label pleasure a low or bestial goal for human beings to aim at. The foremost defender of hedonism in the modern era, Jeremy Bentham, defines utility as

that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of

mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered.³³

Bentham considers pleasure to be one and the same as good, benefit, advantage, good and happiness. That's a fairly diverse spectrum of positive-sounding words to consider identical in meaning. 'Benefit' and 'advantage' are similar enough, and can generally be taken to mean 'that which is good *for us*.' This is not the same as the unequivocal 'good', which is difficult to redefine, other than possibly 'that thing that is valuable.' Let us leave 'good' aside for the moment: our aim is to identify wellbeing and then pursue it, not to demonstrate that wellbeing is (the) good.

This leaves us with 'happiness' meaning 'pleasure', and these two things being synonymous with 'benefit': so, what is good for us is happiness, which is pleasure. This would explain the truth in desire-satisfaction accounts: getting what we desire generally makes us feel good, which is good for us.

5.1

Attitudinal hedonism

To progress, we must establish what pleasure is. The simplest explanation would be that pleasure is a sensation, triggered by various thoughts or experiences, and the antithesis of a different sensation, namely pain. Heathwood objects to such a definition on two grounds: firstly, that pleasure is not a single, uniform sensation, but multiple, different sensations. Secondly, Heathwood thinks that there are pleasures without sensations.

Instead, Heathwood claims that pleasure is a propositional attitude - being pleased *that* something is the case. He then proposes a 'motivational theory of pleasure' that reduces pleasure to desire.³⁴ His background motive is to eliminate hedonism as a rival to desire-satisfactionism: once pleasure is properly understood, we can see that both theories come to the same thing. I think that the motivational theory fails to adequately explain how pleasure works, and an examination of the theory will show why.

The first possible formulation Heathwood considers is this: **S is intrinsically pleased at t that p is true iff S intrinsically desires at t that p be true and p is true.** Heathwood rejects this because he considers the truth condition to be unwarranted – we

³³ Bentham, J. (1948) I.4

³⁴ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 556

are just as pleased by false states of affairs as true ones. In addition, the account fails because truth and desire together are not sufficient: the belief element is missing. Heathwood's preferred form of desire-satisfactionism, if we remember, is subjective: wellbeing equals believing that we get what we want. That leads Heathwood to this: **S is intrinsically pleased at t that p iff S intrinsically desires at t that p and S believes at t that p.**

If Heathwood is correct, then pleasure can be reduced to desire and belief – meaning that desire and belief are the basic attitudes and attitudinal pleasure a complex one. Heathwood believes this is so because attitudinal pleasure entails belief: there's a one-way necessary connection between the two.

He goes on to defend this hypothesis against possible objections: firstly, a case where the subject gets what they want (and believes this) but doesn't experience pleasure – he gives an example where the Froot Loops the subject wanted were actually too sweet³⁵. In this scenario, Heathwood says the instant the subject tasted the Froot Loops, he no longer desired them. Therefore, there was never a time when the desire and the belief that it was fulfilled overlapped – hence no pleasure.

Conversely, pleasure from something undesired (a surprise massage) is impossible, because the moment the subject was aware of the pleasurable experience, he wanted it. Again, the pleasure always coexists with satisfied desire, which is consistent with pleasure supervening on satisfied desire. Finally, there are those cases where the subject wants something, believes they are getting it but are not happy because the desire is extrinsic (not enjoying flossing, which is done only for the sake of cleaner teeth). These cases are no obstacle to Heathwood's theory, which only claims that pleasure occurs when intrinsic desires are satisfied.

With these examples, Heathwood claims to have proved that any objections to his hypothesis rest on a misunderstanding either of the theory's temporal index or its intrinsic requirement. Let us accept the intrinsic requirement – it seems fair to say that it is only the attainment of things we want for themselves that gives us pleasure. The temporal index is much more intriguing. First, we have to establish if Heathwood is right and pleasure always coexists with the belief that a desire is satisfied. If it does, we still have to work out why – Heathwood's answer may not be the only possible one. So: can there be pleasure without belief (that desire is satisfied) or belief without pleasure?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the massage example. Let us examine the first

³⁵ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 558

moment of the massage – just at the point when the subject (Heathwood himself) becomes aware of it. ‘As soon as I became aware of the wonderful sensations, I instantly desired to be feeling them.’³⁶ The postulated mental process seems to be: awareness of massage → desire for massage (which is already satisfied) → pleasure. That is perfectly consistent with the motivational theory. Still, we may be curious as to exactly *why* Heathwood desires the massage. Heathwood’s words make the answer clear: the massage feels wonderful. A wonderful feeling, however, sounds suspiciously like pleasure. That, in itself, might suggest that the pleasure of the massage prompted the desire, which would make no sense under the motivational theory: pleasure cannot cause the desire because pleasure just *is* the (experienced) satisfaction of desire.

The difficulty can be traced to the attitudinal definition of pleasure. If pleasure consists only of being pleased *about* states of affairs, then of course it always goes hand-in-hand with desire satisfaction because it comes to the same thing: being ‘pleased that *p*’ means little more than wanting *p* to be true and believing that it is. However, there may be at least some pleasures that are not *about* anything: they are just pleasures.

If this is the case, the massage example would run like this: the massage provides a pleasurable feeling → Heathwood likes this and wishes it to continue. Whether or not Heathwood is then pleased about the continuing massage is irrelevant – pleasure has, however briefly, existed without desire or belief.

If there can be such a thing as non-attitudinal pleasure, then this second construction makes more sense, and has greater explanatory power: it tells us why we desire things. How can we decide which is true – we feel pleasure because we get what we want, or we want things because they give us pleasure? All we need to disprove Heathwood’s theory is a single instance of pleasure that cannot be explained by getting something we like. Perhaps such an instance would have a physiological cause: a particular stimulation of the brain or a release of dopamine or some such chemical. Such an event might feel intensely pleasurable. It is difficult, however, to say what this pleasure is about. It is implausible to say that the subject is pleased *about* getting the dopamine release that they wanted. They may be entirely ignorant of what is happening in their brain, and in any case, the statement fails to capture the qualitative feeling that is being experienced.

5.2

³⁶ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 558

Sensational pleasure

Despite these problems with Heathwood's motivational theory of pleasure, there remain his two objections to the rival, sensational, theory – namely, that pleasure is not a single, uniform sensation, and that there are pleasures without sensations. Roger Crisp takes up the first difficulty. The problem is brought into relief by comparing pleasant sensations to the sensation of sweetness. All sensations of sweetness have something in common, namely that they are *sweet*. However, pleasurable sensations seem to have no common feature of *being pleasant* – they are simply too diverse for there to be any one feature sensorially present in *all* of them.³⁷

Crisp is unconvinced that the diversity of pleasurable sensations tells against a sensational theory of pleasure. Crisp first considers and rejects an idea from Shelly Kagan, who suggests that 'pleasantness or pleasurableness is not a single common 'component' of pleasant experiences, but a single 'dimension' along which experiences can vary.'³⁸ Kagan likens this dimension to volume, a dimension in which all sounds, however different, exist somewhere. Volume is not a 'kind' of sound, and therefore sounds that do not share any similarities at all can still be rated or grouped in terms of volume. If we apply Kagan's idea of dimension, two very different pleasures – let us say the pleasure of a fond memory and the pleasure of a strawberry ice cream – could both be considered to rate highly on the pleasure scale *because* they are pleasurable.

Crisp finds the distinction between components and dimensions to be unhelpful. Instead, he offers a proposal based on answering the question of what good-feeling actually means. Building on a suggestion by Stuart Rachels, Crisp proposes that experiences we enjoy are those experiences that are good for the people who have them due to how they feel.³⁹ Despite the heterogeneity of pleasant experiences, there is a common enjoyable feeling shared by them all. Crisp refers to this as there being something that it is like to be experiencing enjoyment, much as there is something it is like to be experiencing colour.

Although all experiences with this felt property are different, they can all be identified as enjoyable, and they can be ranked in order of how enjoyable they were. This account is not to be confused with preferentism, because it ignores all considerations other than felt experience (such as desire). To use a distinction employed by Crisp, pleasing

³⁷ Crisp, R. (2006) pp.623

³⁸ pp. 624

³⁹ pp. 627

experience is a 'determinable', whose particular 'determinates' might have nothing else in common. The error of the heterogeneity argument is to ignore that distinction:

Enjoyable experiences do differ from one another, and are often gratifying, welcomed by their subject, favoured, and indeed desired. But there is a certain common quality - feeling good - which any externalist account must ignore. The determinable/determinate distinction also helps us to be clear about the role of 'feeling' in this analysis: Feeling good as a determinable is not any particular kind of determinate feeling.⁴⁰

Both Kagan's and Crisp's rebuttals of the heterogeneity objection rely on there being something about pleasant experiences that is common to all of them, even though those experiences are different from one another. The fact that we are able to group pleasant experiences together in the first place in order to point out the differences between them proves that this must be true – they can all be determined to feel pleasurable.

Heathwood's other criticism of the sensational theory rests on the claim that there are some pleasures that are not sensations at all. Some people would rather have peace and quiet, for example, than pleasurable sensation.⁴¹ This, however, is to take a very narrow view of what sensations are – pleasurable sensations are not necessarily intense and overpowering. Enjoying peace and quiet is not an *absence* of sensation, nor indeed is any conscious experience. Pleasant sensations may just as easily be mild as be intense. We have established that, despite the differences between pleasant feelings, they are all exactly that: pleasant *feelings*. To say that someone takes pleasure in something but receives not even the slightest pleasurable feeling from it is a strange use of the word 'pleasure'.

5.3

Explaining attitudinal pleasure

We have established that pleasure is basic, not a compound of desire and belief. It can be defined as a kind of mental phenomenon or sensation, which is in some way

⁴⁰ Crisp, R. (2006) pp. 628

⁴¹ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 551

connected to brain chemistry. This connection could take a number of forms – perhaps the brain processes give rise to the mental process, or perhaps they are one and the same. Either way, pleasure is a sensation. That sensation might have many different causes: sometimes a particular stimulation of the taste buds or the skin, sometimes drugs or a piece of music.

How, then, can we explain attitudinal pleasure? Clearly, people do get pleased *about* states of affairs. When discussing Heathwood's account, I pointed out that there are examples where pleasure occurs prior to any change in attitudes, which demonstrates that pleasure must *sometimes* be sensational, not attitudinal. However, I want to go further and demonstrate that pleasure is *essentially* sensational. Being pleased *about* particular circumstances can then be explained by those circumstances causing pleasurable sensations.

To demonstrate this, let us remove the pleasurable sensation from something we are pleased about. Returning to Heathwood's formulation, **S is intrinsically pleased at t that p iff S intrinsically desires at t that p and S believes at t that p**. Now let us extract all trace of pleasurable sensation from any such case. Let us say that I intrinsically desire a fair and just society and that I believe that I live in just such a society. However, I feel no warmth or indeed any recognisable sensation about this. I believe that I have what I want, but can I really say that I *take pleasure in* it? Our everyday language provides us with an alternative formulation in circumstances like this. If a state of affairs that we want or prefer comes to pass, but we don't feel anything about it, we would be more likely to say that we *approve* of what has happened. It's quite possible to approve of things without pleasant feelings, especially things that are somewhat detached from us, like justice-in-general. When we say that we are *pleased about* things, but are not *feeling* pleasure, our pleasurable experience has not increased.

Sumner suggests a compromise between sensational and attitudinal accounts of pleasure. Pleasure, he argues, sometimes refers to a sensation with a specific bodily location – think of sex, massages and the like – and sometimes to an attitude of enjoying something, which is not localisable.⁴² But this distinction presupposes a narrow notion of sensation as purely physical or bodily. Not all sensations are like this. There are sensations of aesthetic delight and intellectual excitement. If we take sensation in this broad sense, there can be no objection to viewing *all* pleasure as sensational; and this seems preferable to breaking pleasure down into two separate concepts, as Sumner does.

⁴² Sumner, L. W. (1996) pp. 107

5.4

Moods

One apparent problem with hedonism as a theory of happiness or wellbeing is that the category of pleasure includes all kinds of shallow and fleeting experiences that provide nothing of any real or lasting worth: 'I enjoy, get pleasure from, a cheeseburger, yet I am patently not happier *thereby*.'⁴³ This is not only because of the brief duration of these pleasures – even a sustained pattern of superficial pleasures is insufficient for happiness, claims Haybron. He admits that continual annoyances can make a person unhappy, but this unhappiness is *caused* by the unpleasantnesses rather than consisting of them. What constitutes the subject's unhappiness is their mood – a deep aspect of their psychology. This objection applies equally well when we swap superficial pleasures and pains for those that are intense and striking – they are still only the source of the mood, which is the true substance of our happiness or unhappiness.⁴⁴

Haybron talks of happiness here, which Bentham equates with 'that which is good for us'. It's far from clear that happiness equals wellbeing, but it's a start. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive to describe a deeply miserable person as being well-off. It's certainly not the kind of 'good life' that we are aiming at. If, as Haybron claims, hedonism does not work as a theory of happiness, then hedonism is seriously called into question as a theory of wellbeing.

Moods, claims Haybron, are profound and lasting, and are characterised by a predominance of joyfulness, peace of mind, anxiety, etc. Haybron also stresses the importance of one's 'mood base': one's emotional resilience, or disposition towards certain moods. Admittedly, this appears to be an intuitive way to determine whether or not someone possesses wellbeing or a good and happy life.

There is, however, a certain oddness to this passage: 'To be happy on this sort of view is not necessarily to *feel* happy. A generalized low-level positive mood or sense of tranquillity might suffice for being happy without predominately, or ever, involving the acute

⁴³ Haybron, D. (2001) pp. 505

⁴⁴ pp. 506

emotion of feeling happy.⁴⁵ Can one really *be* happy without ever feeling happy? What exactly does a positive mood consist of if we remove all positive feelings from it? Let us not be deceived by the word ‘acute’ here – sensational hedonism allows the very mildest pleasant sensation to contribute to wellbeing. To have a non-sensational positive mood is to be happy without even the smallest, vaguest, most background tickle of good feeling. Is that really feasible? If we drain every last drop of good feeling from a positive mood, what remains?

Haybron describes moods as deep, enduring states. They are also, at the ‘mood-base’ level, dispositions that determine the kind of experiences we will have. This forward-looking aspect is enough on its own, he says, to demonstrate that mood, not sensation, defines happiness. He is, no doubt, right that a propensity to have positive experiences is typically a feature of a happy person. What is not obvious is that this disposition is what happiness *is*. We could simply say that some people have a disposition to *be* happy, and that disposition is something separate from happiness. The disposition is of great instrumental value and something worthy of pursuit if we want to be happy people, much the same as satisfied desires are, but it doesn’t *constitute* happiness or wellbeing.

The disposition, at any rate, operates at a higher level and helps determine moods. The moods themselves are harder to define. We know they have a tendency to be (but need not always be) lasting and deep, and that we call them joyfulness and depression and so on, but it’s not clear that Haybron says anything to dissuade us that these moods are, in fact, persistent periods of sensational pleasure or pain. Dispositions aside, Haybron thinks that there is a temporal problem to hedonism that mood states neatly avoid. When people are determined to be happy or unhappy, well-off or badly-off, we have to consider the time-frame of that diagnosis.

The appropriate time-frame varies, says Haybron, depending on context: we can be generally happy in recent history, but unhappy at the moment. However, without specific cues, the default for a happiness judgment is long-term. Haybron provides two examples: a previously happy mother whose child has just died, and a previously happy motorist who has just gotten a flat tire. In both cases, we have a moment of high displeasure appearing after a history of pleasure. We would say, he claims, that the mother was happy but is now unhappy – her current condition vastly outweighs her previous condition because statements of happiness are *present* statements. With the motorist, on the other hand, the emphasis should be placed on the broader condition – he is generally happy, just not right

⁴⁵ Haybron, D. (2001) pp. 507

now. The mood theory accounts for this: in the mother's case the mood base has changed, so we can discard the previous one, whereas the motorist's current mood is an exception to the mood base so we discard the current mood.

Whereas the mood theory neatly explains the way we think about these situations, hedonism runs into problems. While the mood theory anchors the subject's happiness level in the deep psychological aspect of their mood base, hedonism has to rely on immediate experience. Hedonism, therefore, treats these two cases the same: the subject was happy before (pleasant experience) but is unhappy now (unpleasant experience). Haybron admits that the unhappiness is far greater in the one case than the other, but a much more significant difference is that 'something psychologically deep and (typically) lasting has happened in one case but not the other'⁴⁶. Hedonism fails to acknowledge this difference, since it treats them both equally as instances of displeasure. Moreover, a statement about current pleasure, unlike mood, fails to tell us anything about how the subject will feel in the future.

This argument is unpersuasive. Hedonism is, in fact, quite able to account for all the differences between these two cases. The inequality of intensity is accounted for easily: one provides a greater sensation of displeasure. The difference of duration is trickier to deal with, but not greatly so. Bentham's calculus offers a range of criteria by which hedonic pleasures and displeasures can be judged, of which duration is one. Even if the intensity of the two situations were equal, the vastly greater duration of the mother's displeasure (even if that displeasure is interrupted many times by moments of pleasure) would be enough to distinguish the two cases.

The lasting quality of the mother's grief, however, is not just about duration - something has changed for the mother that will affect all her future experiences, whereas the flat tire, a day later, might as well have not happened for all the impact it has on the motorist's happiness. How can hedonism account for this difference?

Perhaps we can provide a hedonistic parallel of Haybron's own distinction within moods. The distinction between current mood and pervasive mood base can be translated without too much difficulty into terms of pleasure. Occurrent sensational pleasure alone constitutes happiness. In addition, all manner of biological and psychological factors can contribute to a disposition to be happy or unhappy, but this disposition (although of great instrumental import) is not itself part of happiness - a person of a grim disposition is not necessarily less happy than a cheery one *at any given moment*, but is less likely to be.

⁴⁶ Haybron, D. (2008) pp. 512

Armed with sensational hedonism and hedonic dispositions, we can account for all the differences between pleasures and displeasures that are trivial and superficial, and those which are powerful and lasting. This whole spectrum of happiness and unhappiness can be reduced to the simple elements of good- and bad-feeling and likelihood thereof. This likelihood, this disposition, is of enormous importance when it comes to achieving pleasant sensations, but remains distinct from wellbeing itself. Acknowledging the importance of dispositions protects hedonism from the criticism that it does not predict future wellbeing, yet it allows sensational hedonism to remain the province of occurrent phenomena.

We have dealt with accusations that sensational hedonism is too narrow (there are non-sensational pleasures) and that it is too broad (not all sensational pleasures are significant enough to contribute to wellbeing). We must now consider another common objection: significant or not, are all pleasures *worthy of pursuit*? All pleasures, by definition, make us *feel good*, but might some pleasures be corrupt or damaging in some further sense? In other words, is pleasure the only measure of wellbeing, or do pleasures need to be assessed in terms of non-hedonic values?

5.5

'Objective list' theories of wellbeing

There are many pleasures that we might be hesitant to describe as conducive to the good life. A person who sits all day in front of daytime television, endlessly shovelling oozing doughnuts into their gaping maw may well be experiencing intense and uninterrupted pleasure, but most of us would probably not recommend this life to ourselves or to others. Similarly, the cruel pleasures of the sadist are repugnant to the majority. How can we defend hedonism against this objection? We could, of course, say that this reaction is merely the result of prejudice – perhaps we have been taught by misguided ideologues to reject pleasure (true wellbeing) in favour of non-hedonic values like truth or achievement that have, in fact, no benefit to us. However, rejecting all traditional values is radical and counter-intuitive, and hopefully unnecessary. To avoid it, we need to outfit our hedonic approach to evaluate pleasures to our satisfaction.

In order to work out how best to do this, it is worth considering some opposing approaches to wellbeing. Derek Parfit distinguishes between subjective approaches (e.g. preference hedonism) and objective-list approaches. One side argues that whatever contributes to wellbeing does so because it is wanted or is liked, while the other claims

that wellbeing lies in getting what is intrinsically good, regardless of our feelings towards it⁴⁷.

Both of these accounts fail, says Parfit. Each approach captures something necessary, but neither is sufficient on its own. The best way to account for wellbeing is a synthesis of the two: we need to get what is objectively good and enjoy getting it. If Parfit is right, a combination of subjective and objective approaches may tell us which pleasures truly contribute to wellbeing. The sensation of pleasure itself seems to fall into the subjective category. True, it may be that pleasure is nothing but a state of the brain, if we follow identity theorists, but it is hard to say what could make such a state valuable except for the fact that it *feels* pleasurable to us.

This fulfils one side of Parfit's synthesis. The subjective element alone is not enough, however. We can have a life that is base and depraved, or ignorant and deceived, and yet full of subjective pleasure. We now have to determine if the felt inadequacy of such a life is sufficient reason to turn to some sort of objective list to supplement or filter our pleasures.

Heathwood thinks not. Base and deceived lives lack all manner of things, such as dignity or virtue, but they don't necessarily lack welfare⁴⁸. This may be true, but misleading, insofar as it suggests that dignity and virtue and other moral values have no bearing at all on whether or not we lead good or desirable lives. So, the challenge for the hedonist is to find grounds for disqualifying base and deceived lives from those we count as high in wellbeing *without* introducing an 'objective list' of non-hedonic values.

For the moment then, let us assume that we need some grounds to evaluate pleasure sensations, ideally one that satisfies our intuitions about base and deceived lives. By Parfit's reckoning, this must be some kind of objective list of intrinsic goods, such as being engaged in rational activity or experiencing mutual love⁴⁹. These are no good on their own – someone may have all the 'goods', but if they take no pleasure in them, their life isn't going well. These goods not sufficient, but they are necessary.

However, introducing an objective list in addition to subjective pleasantness is difficult to justify. Suppose, for example, that we include a clause in our hedonistic theory of wellbeing along the lines of 'wellbeing consists in subjective pleasurable sensations *that are based on a true understanding of their objects.*' We then would have to ask, why true understanding (or rational activity or mutual love, etc.) is valuable. If it is valuable *because*

⁴⁷ Parfit, D. (1987) pp. 502

⁴⁸ Heathwood, C. (2006) pp. 533

⁴⁹ Parfit, D. (1987) pp. 502

it provides pleasure then the clause is redundant. Knowing that true understanding leads to pleasure might provide us with useful guidance, but it does not alter the principle: since understanding is conducive to pleasure we were already pursuing it for that reason. On the other hand, if the items on the objective list are good for any other reason, then it is *false* that wellbeing should be identified with pleasure. Maybe all pleasure is good, but other things are good as well, independently of their power to generate pleasure. We would then have to begin again from the very start and find some other principle that is unconditionally good, a principle that pleasure, true understanding, rational activity and mutual love all participate in. Failure to do so would result in a plurality of values, none of which is reducible to something else.

The alternative to an objective list is to find some internal method of evaluation: a way of rating pleasures using no value other than pleasure. This approach proved fruitful in our discussion of desire-satisfactionism: we should satisfy only those desires which lead to a positive balance of satisfactions over frustrations. Let us apply this same methodology to hedonism. To borrow Heathwood's terms: all pleasure sensations are good-in-themselves. However, any activity or decision, even if it is pleasurable, is not all-things-considered desirable unless it results in more total pleasure than total pain.

If successful, this method will achieve several things. It will give us the means to determine whether or not someone is living a good life, and it will give us the beginnings of a guide as to how to live. It will explain, ideally, why we value lives that aren't base or deceived, and perhaps explain if and why virtue contributes to wellbeing.

Let's take our daytime TV friend. On the one hand, he is getting plenty of pleasure and no pain. On the other, his sedentary pose and his doughnut habit may not be kind to his body, resulting in unpleasant discomfort. This seems like a fairly trivial pain and may not surpass or even equal his pleasure. More significantly, he may be afflicted with boredom or dissatisfaction. He may experience shame, either because of a non-hedonic moral system he holds or, if he is a hedonist, because he is not enjoying himself more. Certainly, he will miss out on some of the more intense physical and psychological pleasures of a more active life. It's not a catastrophic verdict for him, but perhaps this is because we have a limited understanding of exactly what pleasures are available to us, and which are the most valuable in hedonic terms: which have the greatest intensity, duration and likelihood of producing more pleasure. At the very least, all-things-considered hedonism can provide us with some grounds for criticising the life of the daytime TV watcher – grounds that invoke no values other than pleasure itself.

What of the sadistic and the ignorant? Let us imagine a serial murderer, as

compared to a kindly and generous person. For the sake of the argument, let us say the acts of killing and generosity provide the same intensity and duration of pleasure to both. We want to say that the kindly person's life contains more welfare than the murderer's, and to do so in purely hedonistic terms. For this to be the case, kindness and generosity must produce pleasurable sensation outside and beyond the particular occasions of their exercise, and do this to a greater extent than murder. More than this, if we are not to discard our intuitions, we want to find that a sadistic life somehow creates pain for the subject: that being bad makes your life worse.

Again, this kind of evaluation requires a deep understanding of the nature of pleasures and pains. Without this understanding, we can only make tentative suggestions – the sadistic life may be plagued with fears of discovery, pangs of remorse and increase the likelihood of going on to make more decisions that might be hedonically detrimental. A life of kindness, on the other hand, is more likely to promote peace of mind, satisfaction with oneself and to result in pleasure-increasing gratitude and kindness from beneficiaries.

The low hedonic value of deceived lives is easier to demonstrate. A theoretical state of perfect deceit, such as Nozick's experience machine, might well provide endless pleasure, but in reality deceptions often come unravelled, resulting in disappointment. Crucially, when we work with faulty information we are less likely to succeed in our endeavours and, as we have seen, getting what we want tends to give us pleasure. Sumner makes the pertinent observation that entering Nozick's machine is off-putting to most of us because we are unable to truly believe that we will get the perfectly pleasurable experience promised, mainly because our prior experiences with machines and situations outside our control have often been unpleasant.⁵⁰

I would go further and say that our prior lives outside the machine make us entirely unqualified to make the decision to enter it or not. All of the values that we have acquired have been developed in a world where actions have consequences and those consequences can be painful. Anything that helps to reduce pain, like true knowledge of how the world works and good behaviour that rewards us with friends to rely on, has become valuable to us in virtue of that possibility of pain. A world of perfect pleasure would operate on entirely different principles, where all these other things quite possibly would not matter at all.

All this tells us two things about pleasure. The most important is that, even if we can assert that wellbeing is pleasure, we don't really know enough about what gives us

⁵⁰ Sumner, L.W. (1996) pp. 98

pleasure to develop a theory about what the best life might be. In addition, we find that there may be straightforward *extrinsic* reasons why a virtuous and well-informed life might be a better life for the one who lives it – it just so happens that these things increase the chances of pleasurable experience. Our priority has to be to work out a strategy for attaining the most pleasure possible.

Many theories of wellbeing attempt to compare and rate pleasures. Bentham's famous calculus provides six criteria for judging the true value of a pleasure or pain, as considered by the one who feels it:

- Intensity: how strongly the pleasure or pain is felt.
- Duration: the length of time that the pleasure or pain extends for.
- Certainty or uncertainty: the likelihood that the pleasure or pain will actually occur.
- Propinquity or remoteness: the closeness or distance of the pleasure or pain to the subject.
- Purity: how much a pleasure is tempered by accompanying pains, and vice versa.
- Fecundity: how likely the pleasure or pain is to produce more pleasures and pains.⁵¹

Fecund acts are those that not only produce pleasure now, but set the subject up for more pleasures in the future. Pure acts provide pleasure untempered by pain, whereas very impure acts might provide pleasure and pain in equal measure. Combining all these factors provides a total sum of the goodness of any act. The judging of acts in this way is designed as a method of determining what we should *do*, and also includes the additional criterion of *extent*: the number of persons affected.

We can use Bentham's calculus for our own purpose: to determine the value of a life, or of all possible lives. The first five criteria help us evaluate each instance of a life and come to, hopefully, a total assessment of wellbeing *over one's whole life*. The last quality, fecundity, is best seen not as a constituent of pleasure itself but useful for obtaining a reliable supply of pleasures in the future and thus as instrumentally valuable. I have used the concept of fecundity to address the concerns of Haybron and Parfit within a purely hedonistic framework: having a good 'mood base', or the various virtues, is not a constituent part of well-being, but is instrumentally important to it, insofar as these things reliably lead to pleasant experiences.

⁵¹ Bentham, J. (1948) IV.2-5

5.6 Maximisation: Problems with Accumulative Hedonism

I have argued that wellbeing consists of pleasure, or more specifically sensory pleasure, and nothing else besides. However, if we are to *be well* and live good and valuable lives, then we need to know something more than this. We need a strategy, a methodology to get as much pleasure and as little pain as possible.

One strategy that might occur to us is this. If – as seems plausible – the satisfaction of desires is generally pleasurable, and a stable majority of our desires *can* reliably be satisfied, then it would seem to make sense to cultivate as many desires as possible, with a view to their eventual satisfaction. If every satisfaction provides a single unit of pleasure, and every frustration an equivalent unit of pain, then every additional desire is likely to increase the balance of pleasure over pain, provided that there is a positive ratio of satisfaction to frustration. Of course, frustrations would also increase to enormous levels, but provided that satisfactions increase faster, net pleasure would continue to increase.

For example, let us say that Ringo desires every flavour of ice cream that he can think of. He has strawberry, chocolate and mint, but is missing lemon and coffee. Three desires are satisfied, and two are frustrated. This gives Ringo a positive net pleasure of one. If Ringo thinks of, and desires, more flavours, then he will be better off so long as he can obtain most of them: if he wants honey, melon and toffee and obtains the first two, he has five satisfied desires to two frustrated, which makes for a net pleasure of three. John, on the other hand, only likes strawberry and coffee: even if he manages to obtain them both, he has a maximum pleasure of two, which is inferior to the partially satisfied Ringo. John is more easily contented, but Ringo's capacity for pleasure can far surpass John's, even when he is frustrated.

A strategy of this sort is likely to appeal to many inhabitants of modern consumer society: advertisers exhort us to want more and more. Being satisfied with what we have is felt to be somehow discreditable; it suggests a feeble, unambitious attitude to life.

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied', wrote Mill famously.⁵² Mill was talking of quality, not quantity, of pleasure here, but his words neatly encapsulate the maximising approach: someone with more limited desires is easy to satisfy, but is, by virtue of those limitations, a

⁵² Mill, J. S. (2009) pp. 57

less desirable person to be.

Nonetheless, there are some obvious problems with the maximising approach. The first is that, no matter how much pleasure one accumulates, one always knows that more pleasure is available: one has a great many unsatisfied desires. Even if one has more satisfactions than frustrations, knowing that one has satisfied only a portion of the total sum of one's desires is, in itself, an added frustration. If our single and greatest goal in life is gaining pleasure through the satisfaction of desires, then that frustration may be a very significant and damaging one. And if one sees others getting more of what they want, then the pains of envy may be added to those of frustration.

A much more significant problem is that the more desires one has, the greater the risk that they will not be satisfied, and the greater the penalty if they are not satisfied. Our exposure to potential frustration is, as it were, increased. (If the person with 100 desires fails to satisfy 60 per cent of them, he will end up with a net total of -20; if the person with 1000 desires fails to satisfy 60 per cent of them, he will end up with a net total of -200.) Even if a person with many desires succeeds in satisfying most of them, knowing that he may not always be able to do so in the future will itself be a source of anxiety; and this anxiety will increase the more desires he has.

There is an alternative to the 'maximising' strategy. Instead of fostering as many desires as possible, in the hope that most of them will be satisfied, we can choose to *limit* our desires, to *ensure* their satisfaction. I will refer to this approach as a 'perfectionist' approach to pleasure as opposed to a 'maximising' one. We have established that pleasures do not stand in need of evaluation by non-hedonic criteria, but instead should be chosen or rejected after consideration of what would provide the greatest pleasure overall. A perfectionist strategy is built on the assumption that the best way to achieve this is to focus on satisfying most, if not all, desires, which implies keeping our desires to a bare minimum. What is sought is not the highest possible sum of satisfaction, but the best possible ratio of satisfaction to frustration, and therefore of pleasure to pain.

On first appearance, both approaches have their plusses and minuses. Maximising strategies have the potential to provide more pleasure, but carry a greater risk of failure and pain. Perfectionist strategies promise to limit pain, but also pleasure as well.

However, this way of framing the debate rests on a crucial, hidden presupposition – that pleasure is the kind of thing that can be increased indefinitely, or at least up to the limit of the brain's capacity to generate pleasure. Most modern hedonists indeed seem to think

of it this way. Fred Feldman is representative. 'I see no reason to suppose that there is any upper or lower bound to these numbers [representing quantities of pleasure and pain]. No matter how well things are going for you at a certain time, they might be going better for you (or for someone else) at some other time.'⁵³

However, there is another way of thinking about pleasure, as simply the absence of pain. On this conception, to satisfy all one's desires is to experience perfect pleasure. Adding to the sum total of satisfied desires cannot increase one's pleasure further, whereas failing to satisfy any of them can diminish it. The only way is down. If we think of pleasure in this way, the maximising strategy is not merely risky in practice, for the reasons described above; it is theoretically incoherent. Multiplying desires cannot lift one above the point of perfect contentment; it can only create occasions for dissatisfaction. The only coherent strategy, if pleasure is limited, is a perfectionist one: we ought to limit our desires as far as possible, with a view to minimising dissatisfaction.

Let us return to John and Ringo, this time assuming that pleasure does indeed have a limit at the absence of pain. John has both of his desired flavours and is not missing any. He therefore experiences perfect pleasure. Ringo, on the other hand, has five out of eight, leaving a significant portion of his desires unsatisfied. Instead of perfect pleasure, he has moderate dissatisfaction, and is significantly worse off than John.

Epicurus conceived of pleasure in the way I have outlined, as the absence of pain; this conception underlies his ascetic philosophy of life. In the rest of this thesis I want to achieve two things. Firstly, I want to present Epicurean ethics in the strongest light possible, defending it against certain common objections. Secondly, I want to demonstrate that Epicurus was correct in his belief that there is a limit to pleasure, and therefore that perfectionism is the best method to attaining a good and pleasant life.

⁵³ Feldman, F. (2010) pp. 162

Part 2; Epicureanism

6

An introduction to Epicureanism

In the last chapter, I made a case for hedonism. I argued that hedonism can give us a complete and self-sufficient account of wellbeing, judging lives and events by the single variable of pleasurable feeling alone, without the introduction of additional conditions or values. Hedonism can also explain the power that satisfied and unsatisfied desires can have over whether our lives are going well or badly.

As a theory of wellbeing, then, hedonism is sufficient. However, as a guide to how we ought to live our lives, modern hedonism is lacking. It is not enough for us to be told that people whose lives contain more pleasure are better off. We advance a little further if we agree that pleasure is a sensation, and that it is often brought about by satisfying our desires. What we now need is a guide to *getting* pleasure. What will help us greatly in this endeavour is both a deeper understanding of just how the satisfaction of desire and pleasure interact with one another and a way to critique our desires so as to determine which ones we ought to fulfil. We have already identified the best strategy for long-term wellbeing as being one that promotes pleasure and rejects pain. What Epicureanism can provide us with are the specifics: which pleasures are the greatest? Which pains are the worst? What manner of living achieves the best balance for us? In particular, Epicureanism offers an intriguing alternative to the 'maximising' approach to pleasure that dominates modern culture.

6.1

Eudaimonia

To make the best sense of Epicurus' beliefs, we must consider the theoretical framework of his time. Along with his rivals and contemporaries, Epicurus' goal was to achieve eudaimonia, the final purpose of each human life. The nature of this final purpose was bitterly disputed, but Julia Annas claims that there were enough common threads, in method if not in content, to piece together an account of what eudaimonia *is*.

The first major feature of ancient ethical thinking, and one that distinguishes it from modern ethics, is the holistic nature of the investigation: ethical thinking begins with

considering life as a whole.⁵⁴ The good, whatever it may be, is not something that can come into conflict with other things we value: it is the final end to which all other ends are subordinate.⁵⁵ Although the various ancient conceptions of eudaimonia are too diverse to say there is anything approaching *the* ancient concept of the good life, Annas claims to identify some further common features.

Eudaimonia, claims Annas, is not simply something that can be possessed – something that could be given or taken away by chance. Instead, it involves our own activity in some way. Annas quotes the Aristotelian Arius that ‘it accords with reason that our final end is not a fulfilment of bodily and external goods, nor getting them, but rather living according to virtue among all or most and the most important bodily and external goods.’⁵⁶ This leads Annas to note ‘the almost complete absence in ancient ethics of anything resembling consequentialist ideas’⁵⁷ – eudaimonia is not about ‘having’ the good regardless of the means of attaining it.

Modern hedonism, by contrast, is very much consequentialist: what matters is having pleasure, not how you get it. Where does Epicureanism fall between these two radically different approaches? According to Annas, it sits firmly in the eudaimonistic camp. ‘Its conception of the kind of pleasure that is our final end does not make that a state of affairs to the achievement of which the nature of our actions in achieving it is irrelevant.’⁵⁸ I reject this interpretation. Certainly, Epicurus was offering a recipe for eudaimonia, but he did not understand this notion in the way that Annas understands it. Eudaimonia, for Epicurus, is a state of mind; actions can bring it about, but they remain external to it. This places Epicureanism together with modern consequentialist theories and apart from Aristotle and the Stoics.

It is just as well for this project that Annas is wrong about Epicurus. I have already established that we are pursuing a sensational hedonistic account of wellbeing. We have judged a good life to consist of pleasurable sensation, and rejected all other sources of value, with the exception of the *instrumental* value of anything that contributes to pleasurable sensation or future likelihood thereof. If Epicureanism is to fulfil the conditions I have put upon a viable theory, it would have to operate without reference to non-

⁵⁴ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 33

⁵⁵ pp. 31

⁵⁶ pp. 37

⁵⁷ pp. 37

⁵⁸ pp. 37

hedonistic values. I believe that an analysis of Epicureanism shows that it does, in fact, meet these conditions. I return to the issue in detail in section 10.1 below

6.2

Atomism

Epicurus' ethical doctrine is what interests us here, but it makes sense to set out his physics and metaphysics first, at least to the extent that this informs the ethics that follow.

In his letter to Herodotus, Epicurus sets out his atomic theory simply and clearly. Firstly, he states that nothing can come from nothing, nor can the existent become non-existent. Instead, there persists a certain amount of matter, the totality of which cannot change because there is nothing outside it to effect change in it.⁵⁹ His second point is that this totality is composed solely of bodies (which we know to exist because of our sensations) and the empty void in which they move. The void must exist for there to be somewhere for these bodies to exist in and move through. These bodies are the 'irreducible and immutable atoms'⁶⁰ and the compounds that they make up.

The totality of things is infinite because a finite totality would mean an end point and the beginning of something else, and nothing exists outside the totality of existent things. Both atoms and the void must be infinite, the former because they would otherwise spread out too far in infinite space to form the compounds they do, and the latter in order to hold an infinite number of atoms.⁶¹ The atoms themselves are irreducible and imperceptible, constantly in motion due to collision with one another and vibrations caused by the atoms themselves in space. They are capable of forming an indeterminate number of shapes and compounds, including an infinite number of worlds like and unlike our own.

The reason for this internal vibration is that the nature of the empty space that separates the individual atoms produces this effect, since it is unable to provide any support, and also the solidity characteristic of the atoms causes them to rebound after collision to the extent that intertwining permits reestablishment of motion after collision. These

⁵⁹ Epic. Ep. Het. 39

⁶⁰ 41

⁶¹ 42

vibrations have no starting point, the atoms themselves and empty space being the causes.⁶²

This series of collisions and rebounds, reliant only on the properties of the atoms themselves and the void they inhabit, has huge ramifications for Epicurus' understanding of how the world works, and hence how best we should live in it. It offers a world-view decidedly at odds with those of Aristotle and the Stoics, and in doing so supports a consequentialist approach to ethics which is consistent with the account of sensational hedonism we have developed. As opposed to a teleological cosmos, full of purpose and meaning, everything that happens in Epicurus' atomic universe is contingent – the result of one atom colliding with another that needn't have been there at all. In such a universe, it makes sense to look for value only in the observable consequences of things.

Despite Epicurus' claims to be self-taught, parallels have been drawn between his philosophy and that of Democritus, a link supported by accounts that he studied under Democritus' follower Nausiphanes. The strongest Democritean influence is apparent in Epicurus' atomic theory, and the implications it has for ethics.⁶³ Mechanistic atomism naturally inspires an anti-teleological world-view – things happen *because* of previous events, not *for* a purpose. This differs greatly from the Stoic view of events unfolding in a perfect and inevitable path according to fate or a divine will.

The adoption of atomism also forces Epicurus to re-evaluate divine creation and influence: if the cosmos is constituted purely of particles in the void, shaped and reshaped by aimless movement, then interventionist gods and demiurges are no longer conceivable.⁶⁴ Epicurus' gods are distinguished from the traditional Greek deities and those of other cultures by virtue of their supreme indifference to human affairs.

Pierre-Marie Morel identifies two major principles of ancient atomism. First, all bodies are either indivisible small bodies or are composed of them.⁶⁵ Second, this first principle is not just a single aspect of physics, but the essential core on which all other aspects depend. Let us look at the first principle: there are no existent bodies other than the indivisible atoms and the structures they comprise. In addition to the void, the empty space between atoms, these make up all that exists – everything that is can be reduced to

⁶² Epic. Ep. Hdt. 43

⁶³ Warren, J. (2002) pp. 6

⁶⁴ pp. 7

⁶⁵ Morel, P. (2009) pp. 65

the atoms and void. Epicurus calls these entities the only complete natures.⁶⁶ Morel points out that a truly reductionist view implies that all the properties and causal powers of objects must be fully explainable by their component atoms. The difficulties for a moral theory are readily apparent: if I am composed of atoms, and the movements of those atoms is rooted in their previous collisions against each other and atoms outside me, then there is no reason to attribute responsibility to me for my actions – they are just the most recent events in a long causal chain.⁶⁷

While atom-based causality raises potential problems for moral responsibility in Democritus' account, Epicurus considered his own formulation to have avoided the difficulty. His own words on the determinism-defying 'swerve' have not survived, but his Roman disciple Lucretius leaves us with some explanation. If all atoms moved uniformly and continuously, they would not collide with one another to form compounds. There must, therefore, be imperceptible and unpredictable alterations of direction.⁶⁸

These deviations or 'swerves' serve to rebut accusations of determinism. Lucretius asks 'If every motion of atoms is always continuous with another and if new motion always originates from old in determinate sequence, and if it is the case that the primal bodies do not swerve and at least begin to break the bonds of determinism, thus preventing cause from following cause in perpetuity, then why do living creatures throughout the world have freedom of the will, this freedom torn from necessity that allows each of us to go where his pleasure bids?'

We could, of course, argue that living creatures do *not* have freedom of will, only the illusion of it. The atomic swerve does, however, seem to offer the potential of spontaneous new chains of events, a starting point of moral responsibility in an atomic cosmos. The obvious question is whether a combination of causally determined atomic movements and indeterminate swerves is sufficient to account for moral responsibility.

What is clear is that each person is at the centre of a vast and complex web of motives, desires, fears and experiences. Each strand begins externally to that person's consciousness – in experience or information or biology over which that person has no control. All of these threads, each of which is made increasingly unpredictable by the random occurrences of the swerve, meet in the unique and only partially-determined combination that is a person. Therefore, it is reasonable to attribute a measure of

⁶⁶ Epic. Ep. Hdt. 40

⁶⁷ Morel, P. (2009) pp. 67

⁶⁸ Lucr. 2.216-24

responsibility to the individual complexity of a particular person, as a person's individual make-up is a much more significant factor in any decision than any one of the external influences and, given the way those influences are combined with random elements, more than simply the sum of them. In other words, we can say that a person acted in a particular way primarily because of the person that they are, even though the person that they are is dictated by a combination of external causes and random indeterminacies.

There are two obvious problems with this account of responsibility. The first is that it relies on Epicurean atomism, an ontology that does not correspond with our modern understanding of the universe. An extensive evaluation of Epicurean atomism is not appropriate or required for our purpose – suffice it to say that is not a scientifically acceptable theory, and can immediately be shown to be such by glancing at any number of the claims in Epicurus' letter to Herodotus, such as that the sense of sight functions via intangible atomic films being generated by objects, resembling those objects exactly in colour and shape, and travelling at great speeds into the eye or mind of the beholder.⁶⁹

Luckily, we don't have to accept Epicurus' ontology in order to embrace his ethics. A modern scientific understanding of the world can also accommodate the kind of moral responsibility that Epicurus believes we have. If we replace Epicurean atomism with a modern physics of molecules, atoms and sub-atomic particles, we get the very same aimless universe of causality. The indeterminate factor provided by the swerve also survives in modern theory, in forms including quantum randomness. Again, this is not the place to undertake a full evaluation of these theories – it is enough to know that we do not have to shackle ourselves to an ancient and incorrect understanding of the universe in order to share Epicurus' conviction that we live in a universe composed of chains of cause and effect; chains which can be interrupted and started anew by indeterminate occurrences.

The other problem is potentially more serious. As I have outlined, the individual person can be said, due to the complexity and uniqueness of their make-up, to be the major cause of decisions and beliefs. However, since that complexity is not self-determined (but rather determined by external factors and random indeterminacies), it could be argued that the individual is not morally responsible at all. This is a concern for many moral philosophies, particularly those like Kant's, which are greatly concerned with the source of the agent's intentions. Epicureanism, in contrast, assigns ethical value to the possession of pleasure, which significantly reduces the burden placed on moral

⁶⁹ Epic. Ep. Hdt. 46a

responsibility. To live a life that is valuable, one has to feel good, and this is not dependent on complete freedom of agency.

Instead, possession of pleasure requires two things: a situation that does not contain too much pain, and a personality that is well-trained for pleasure. The situation can be controlled to some extent, but is to a large degree determined by external conditions. The personality, on the other hand, with its desires and values and its abilities to summon pleasure and ignore pain, is capable of being shaped, and shaping this personality is the Epicurean's primary goal.

In Susan Wolf's *Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility*, various forms of the 'deep-self view' are evaluated. These accounts, by Harry Frankfurt, Gary Watson and Charles Taylor, make reference to second-order desires, or deeper and more reflective selves. In these theories, the desires and values that we have, which are of course heavily influenced by external, uncontrolled factors, can be changed by our deeper, second-order desires: desires about what we *want* to desire. Therefore, we can be free of an ingrained prejudice because of our desire to not be prejudiced, or give up a vain desire because we do not wish to have such a desire. This fails, says Wolf, to solve the problems of determinism, because those second-order desires are determined in their turn. Even if there are third, fourth, or any number of orders of desire, the problem is merely pushed back by stages.⁷⁰

This may be a concern for those with a strong ideal of responsibility, but not for Epicurus. We can give up vain and harmful desires because of our deeper desire to have good and pleasant lives. *Why* we want to have good and pleasant lives is not a source of unease for Epicurus: he considers it natural that we do. The possibility, indeed the *certainty* that this deeper desire arises naturally in a way that we cannot control takes nothing away from the ethical value of a pleasant life. We are not responsible for what our deepest self desires, only for how well we mould ourselves to achieve those desires.

7

The Requirements of the Good Life

Epicurus tells us that what is good is being in a pleasant state, a state free of mental and physical pain. This account occupies something of a middle ground in ancient ethics, in that it places *some* importance on the 'external goods' of wealth and bodily health. One

⁷⁰Wolf, S. (1987)

alternative to this is that external goods do not matter at all for wellbeing; another is that external goods count for more than Epicurus and his followers give them credit for.

The Stoics did not consider poverty or bodily pain to be an obstacle to the good life. In his *Discourses*, Epictetus advocates renouncing all things external to the mind and the virtues. Desiring to obtain or avoid any such thing (avoiding pain, for example) prevents someone from being 'free and faithful'⁷¹. Instead they become subject to those externals, which are beyond their control, and subject to anyone who can provide them with, or deprive them of, those things. To Stoics like Epictetus, peace of mind makes physical distress entirely irrelevant. It is impossible to be harmed, say the Stoics, unless we believe we are harmed.⁷² Part of the reason for the Stoics' stress on indifference to physical suffering is their identification of our selves with our minds alone. Sickness and pains are not *our* problems but our body's, and hence cannot be damaging to us.

On the other end of the spectrum is Aristotle's 'great-souled man'. Among his other virtues we find, for example, munificence, which concerns the spending of money on public functions and celebrations. Not contributing enough money to such events exhibits the vice of shabbiness or meanness.⁷³ If munificence is truly a virtue, then mere freedom from mental and physical pain are not enough – we need a certain amount of worldly wealth to attain the good life. Aristotle is often accused of a certain elitism: becoming a 'great-souled man' is extremely difficult or even impossible for those without a noble birth, good upbringing and material means.

For Epicurus, by contrast, the good life is readily available to most people, as long as they are willing to disdain and discard those desires that cause frustration and pain. The extensive possessions mentioned by Aristotle are unnecessary. On the other hand, physical pain really does make life go less well, so even the best lived life is vulnerable to the risk of disease or violence. In what follows, I will examine the Epicurean accounts of pleasure, pain and desire, and explain why the absence of mental and physical pain is deemed to be necessary and sufficient for the good life.

8

Pleasure

Epicurus' moral philosophy has two basic tenets. First and foremost, what matters, and *all*

⁷¹ Epict. Gnom. I.4.19

⁷² Epict. Ench. 20

⁷³ Broadie, S. (2002) pp. 28

that matters, is pleasure. All pleasures are good, although not all pleasures are choiceworthy. Similarly, all pains are bad, even though some pains might be choiceworthy. Secondly, the topmost limit of pleasure is the absence of pain.⁷⁴

That pleasure is the sole good is immediately obvious to Epicurus, and he argues for this, in part, from observations of empirical fact: even infants seek pleasure and avoid pain.⁷⁵ Cicero describes the Epicurean position in this way: 'Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperturbed, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.'⁷⁶

This looks, at first, like Aristotelian teleology: pleasure is the end of human life. But according to Epicurus, human beings have no inherent purpose or goal, just the individual purposes and desires we each hold.⁷⁷ Pleasure is 'natural' not in the sense that it is our inherent end but simply in the sense that it is what we all spontaneously aim at, without needing to be taught. This is the implication of what has been called 'the cradle test'.

In addition, there is the argument from immediate experience: the goodness and badness of pleasure and pain are perfectly evident to the subject – no further argument is required. The nature of pleasure is familiar to us.⁷⁸ Again, this argument is recounted by Cicero:

Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to *prove* that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them... Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?⁷⁹

At first glance, this type of reasoning seems to support desire-satisfactionism or

⁷⁴ O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 107

⁷⁵ pp. 113

⁷⁶ Cic. Fin. I.30

⁷⁷ O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 112

⁷⁸ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 189

⁷⁹ Cic. Fin. I.30

preferentism, or other such theories which place importance on what we want. However, Epicurus insists that many desires, even when satisfied, fail to reduce pain and increase pleasure, and are therefore misguided. In this way, Epicurus puts value on pleasure in much the same fashion as we have already argued for: it is the one thing which we all pursue, and we pursue it because of the way that it feels, while all other things we pursue we pursue for the sake of pleasure.

It is perhaps premature to argue for the value of pleasure without having first established what the Epicurean notion of pleasure is. Epicurus' account of pleasure and desire is somewhat unique within the hedonist tradition: he makes some particular and technical distinctions which are vital to understanding both pleasure as the ultimate goal and the Epicurean way of life.

Previously, I compared the sensational account of pleasure with other kinds, such as the attitudinal account. Epicurus' own words identify him as subscribing to the former. The reason Epicureans do not fear death is that 'every good and evil lies in sensation; but death is the privation of sensation.'⁸⁰ If every good and evil lies in sensation, then for pleasure, happiness, ataraxia and aponia to be good and desirable things, they must be forms of sensation. Pleasure is a quality of feeling.

8.1

Limits of pleasure

One feature that marks out Epicurean hedonism from most modern varieties is its limited character. Pleasure is not to be accumulated indefinitely. Instead, Epicurus says that 'we have need of pleasure only when we feel pain because of the absence of pleasure, but whenever we do not feel pain we no longer stand in need of pleasure.'⁸¹ Epicurus' stated goal is slightly more complex than simply the pursuit of pleasure: 'A steady view of these matters shows us how to refer all moral choice and aversion to bodily health and imperturbability of mind, these being the twin goals of happy living. It is on this account that we do everything we do – to achieve freedom from pain and freedom from fear.'⁸²

Pain and pleasure feature in other forms of hedonism, most obviously Mill's, as opposite qualities. Within Epicureanism, pain is the fundamental element – pleasure consists of the removal or the absence of pain. Let us examine these 'twin goals' that

⁸⁰ Epic. Ep. Men. 124

⁸¹ 128

⁸² 128

Epicurus mentions. The first is bodily health: to be not cold, not hungry, not injured. This is the condition of *aponia*, the absence of physical distress.⁸³ Although Epicureanism places a greater focus on the absence of mental pain (the second goal), *aponia* is a vital component of the happy life, both because physical pain disrupts happiness and because mental peace is intimately connected to bodily health in the past, present and future.

The second goal is *ataraxia*, mental tranquillity. This is the greater part of happiness, and is attained by ridding oneself of fear and worry. The anxieties that prevent *ataraxia* include fear of death and the gods, which Epicurus attacks through rational argument, and the worry that we will not have *aponia* in the future. Together, *aponia* and *ataraxia* constitute complete absence of pain and distress. This appears at first to be a negative form of hedonism – a lack of something bad rather than the attainment of something good. It is partly for this reason that Epicureanism attracted criticism from those who considered lack of pain to be a neutral state, with a value of zero. The members of the Cyrenaic school were such critics. They believed that there was further, positive pleasure to be had above and beyond an absence of physical and mental pain.⁸⁴

Epicurus would argue that this is a misreading of *ataraxia* and *aponia*. Instead of a mere absence of negative feeling, the painless state is the highest and greatest pleasure possible. This is because *ataraxia* and *aponia* are positive states of awareness and, uniquely among human experiences, are untainted by pain or distress. This is the part of Epicurean theory that seems the least feasible to a modern hedonist: how can the absence of pain be the upper limit of pleasure? The answer lies in the distinction drawn by Epicurus between different categories of pleasure.

8.2

Different types of pleasure

Epicureans distinguish between physical pleasures and mental ones, and between static and active pleasures. It is by examining these distinctions that Epicurus' unique view of pleasure comes into focus, especially in comparison to the views of rival schools, such as the Cyrenaics.

⁸³ O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 120

⁸⁴ pp. 121

Mental and physical pleasures

Mental pains and pleasures, says Epicurus, are greater than those which are physical. Bodily pleasures and pains can exist only in the present, whereas their mental counterparts refer to past, present and future. We can be affected at the present moment with memories of past pleasures and pains, or the hope or fear of pleasures and pains to come, and these memories and anticipations cause pleasures and pains of their own. Epicurus claims that physical pleasures and pains are the root of the mental ones – i.e. that mental pains are the acknowledgement, memory or anticipation of some physical pleasure or pain. However, the mental pleasures and pains are greater than the physical.⁸⁵

The Cyrenaics, on the other hand, argue that physical pains and pleasures are more intense than mental ones and are therefore weightier. I think that this disagreement may rest, to some extent, on the different priorities of the two schools. The Cyrenaic idea of pleasure and the good life is very different from the Epicurean ideal. Annas points to the non-eudaimonistic approach of the Cyrenaics – they were not concerned with life as a whole, but only the present moment. Hence their attempt to secure the maximum intensity of experience was a pursuit of pleasure but not, as they admitted, of happiness.⁸⁶

Why should we prefer the Epicurean ideal of pleasure to the Cyrenaic? If, as we have established, we want to attain sensational pleasure, then surely the Cyrenaic approach should be very tempting to us. Even if we were to find the thought of a life pursuing only immediate sensations of pleasures distasteful or wasteful, we would be abandoning the hedonistic principle if we were to reject such a life for anything other than a life of *greater* pleasure. Everything we have left from Epicurus suggests a consequentialist approach: if he preferred to approach pursuit of pleasure across life as a whole rather than moment-to-moment, it is because the long-term approach is less reliant on chance and provides a greater likelihood of pleasure at any given moment.

This becomes clear when we consider the lasting nature of mental pleasures. However intense the current sensation of a Cyrenaic-style pleasure, say, biting into a particular delicacy, might be, that pleasure will be very temporary. However, if we are beset by worries and concerns (perhaps about running out of this lovely food), then we will be afflicted by these mental pains indefinitely. The Epicurean, by contrast, has the constant

⁸⁵ O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 11

⁸⁶ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 38

pleasure of *ataraxia* – the highly pleasurable state of being without any painful concerns. If he or she were to be accosted by physical pain, its fleeting nature would prevent it from making too great a mark against the constancy of mental joy.

This alone would, if demonstrated to be true, be enough to vindicate the pursuit of mental pleasure over physical. However, Epicureanism also attacks the idea that the indulgent Cyrenaic is possessed of greater *physical* pleasure. The extravagant banquets of the Cyrenaics offer nothing greater than the humble meals eaten in Epicurus' garden. This accounts to much more than a preference for mental over physical pleasure, and is much more contrary to the spirit of modern hedonism.

8.2ii

Kinetic and katastemic pleasure

The difference between mental and physical pleasures is not the only distinction drawn by Epicurus. Another, perhaps more important, is between pleasures that are active, *kinetic*, and static, *katastemic*.⁸⁷ Understanding the difference requires one to bear in mind that pleasures have value only with reference to pains and wants.

Kinetic pleasure is the active removal of a pain. This includes the satisfaction of desires, because unsatisfied desires *are* pains. Anything we want but do not have hurts us. The pain of hunger is the want of food, and eating is the active satisfaction of that want. Once we are no longer hungry, we experience a different type of pleasure, that of being sated and content. This is the second category of pleasure, the static, katastemic – the pleasure of being without pain. This duality applies in the same way to mental pleasures: joy is active, the removal of mental pain, while tranquillity is the static state of being without distress.⁸⁸

When we consider the demands of a final end in life, or *eudaimonia*, static pleasures represent the greater prize. 'Epicurus identifies our final end with what he calls tranquillity or ataraxia, which is static pleasure', writes Annas, 'Thus the pleasures that come from fulfilling needs do not form our final end; what is complete and self-sufficient is static pleasure or ataraxia. Though we need kinetic pleasures, they are not enough to amount to our final end in life.'⁸⁹

This is one of the more contentious points of Epicurean theory. A state of being

⁸⁷ Wolfsdorf, D. (2012) pp. 148

⁸⁸ O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 120

⁸⁹ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 188

without pain is considered by Epicurus to be not just pleasurable, but the highest pleasure. This presents a sharp contrast to the Cyrenaics, and to Socrates and Plato, none of whom consider the katastemic pleasures to be pleasures at all.

The Cyrenaics admit only kinetic pleasures, and hold the katastemic to be simply neutral states, neither pleasures nor pains. States of contentment qualify as pleasures to Epicurus because we enjoy them. That alone is enough to elevate something above the neutral.⁹⁰ The static pleasures are not just the equal of the kinetic, however, but are vastly superior to them – they are pure pleasures completely undiluted by pain.

By Epicurus' reckoning, say the Cyrenaics, the happiest person is dead or asleep, as in these states we are without pain.⁹¹ This objection rests on a misunderstanding of what Epicurus meant by painlessness: for Epicureans, *aponia* and *ataraxia* are positive mental states that require awareness and consciousness.⁹² This is a necessary implication of a sensational theory of pleasure: if pleasure is sensation then we cannot be in a senseless state to experience it.

This only establishes that we must be conscious to experience pleasure, not that a conscious painless state is, in fact, pleasurable. If we are conscious of it, we can certainly say that a state of painlessness has a particular felt quality. The pressure is on Epicureans to demonstrate that this felt quality is of a positive, rather than a neutral nature.

8.3

Pleasures beyond the absence of pain

These, then, are the basic principles of the Epicurean theory of pleasure. The final end in life is katastemic pleasure, which is limited to the absence of pain in body and mind. This state of peace is dependent on having few or no unsatisfied desires. Immediately, a problem appears: it seems highly counter-intuitive to say that pleasure is limited at the absence of pain. This may be the greatest obstacle to accepting the philosophy of Epicurus.

We normally consider pain to be negative, pleasure positive, and there to be some sort of neutral, intermediate place without pleasure or pain – a 'zero point' on the scale of wellbeing. To be told that, once the unpleasantness of pain is removed, there is nowhere further to go, no distinction between bland contentment and the heights of pleasure,

⁹⁰ Cic. Fin. I.30

⁹¹ D.L. 2.88

⁹² O'Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 121

seems very strange indeed. Resolving this oddness is one of the major challenges to making Epicureanism a convincing and workable theory.

8.3i

Woolf on luxury

Raphael Woolf suggests a possible solution for this problem, which is to allow for additional, *luxurious* pleasures that exist in addition to katastemic contentment. I think that this approach fails to solve the problem and violates the central tenet of Epicureanism: that contentment is the absolute limit of pleasure. Examining this theory can tell us a lot about what Epicureanism *doesn't* allow for, and helps to inform my solution to this problem.

Firstly, Woolf makes a distinction – lack of pain is pleasant, but it is not the only pleasure. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus refers to the pleasures of the profligate; specifically, he states that they don't represent the Epicurean goal or generate the pleasant life. This makes it quite clear that, although not valuable or worth pursuing, the excessive and sumptuous joys usually associated with hedonism *are* pleasures. If Epicurus rejects them, his philosophy must be more than simple hedonism – only certain pleasures are to be sought.⁹³ In the same passage that Woolf draws this from, Epicurus also refers to these rejected pleasures as 'the pleasures inherent in positive enjoyment.'⁹⁴ Again, this suggests that Epicurus does admit the possibility of pleasure 'over and above' the threshold of *ataraxia*, though he does not regard such pleasure as valuable.

Woolf's use of the term 'luxury' here is quite specific and should not be confused with the general category of kinetic pleasures. Kinetic pleasures can simply contribute towards lack of pain, rather than surpassing it. Luxuries are a distinct subcategory of kinetic pleasures that take us above and beyond katastemic pleasure; they represent a positive state of pleasure that is superior to the simple absence of pain. These pleasures are not needed to live or to be content; therefore, they can be called 'luxurious'. Woolf argues that Epicurus is not, in fact, rejecting luxury – quite the reverse. Woolf reads Epicurus as welcoming luxury, provided that its pursuit doesn't detract from the pain-free state of tranquillity.⁹⁵ 'Rather, the point is that one be content with the little that (Epicurus believes) is always ready to hand in the natural order of things.'⁹⁶

⁹³ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 158

⁹⁴ Epic. Ep. Men. 131

⁹⁵ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 160

⁹⁶ pp. 162

If we are to read Epicurus as promoting luxury in circumstances where it doesn't jeopardise tranquillity, we would have to accept that there is value in something other than tranquillity itself, a viewpoint that does not come across immediately in the Epicurean materials. Indeed, tranquillity is referred to as the upper limit of pleasure.⁹⁷ How, then, are luxuries capable of adding to the perfect pleasures of *aponia* and *ataraxia*? Firstly, Woolf wants to correct the view of Epicurus as a determined ascetic who eschewed fine things as corrupting and harmful. He points to this quote from the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

We consider self-sufficiency a great good, not in order that in all circumstances we use little, but so that, if we do not have much, we be satisfied with little, having been genuinely persuaded that luxury is most pleasantly enjoyed by those who need it least, and that what is natural is all easy to procure, and what is empty is hard to procure.⁹⁸

It's clear from this, Woolf says, that the simple, self-sufficient life is not superior to one of great luxury, but the person who is content with little has no trouble maintaining peace of mind and body even in the midst of luxury.⁹⁹ The worry is that enjoying luxurious pleasures endangers our ability to be content with little, a concern expressed by this passage:

Hence becoming habituated to a simple rather than a lavish way of life provides us with the full complement of health; it makes a person ready for the necessary business of life; it puts us in a position of advantage when we happen upon sumptuous fare at intervals and prepares us to be fearless in facing fortune.¹⁰⁰

'Habituated' suggests practice, which would require that we spend a fair amount of time experiencing only the simple life. This method of habituation means we will be better able than most to enjoy luxury 'at intervals'. This raises the concern that even the well-trained Epicurean may not be able to experience long-term luxury without becoming dependent on

⁹⁷ Epic. Ep. Men. 132

⁹⁸ 130

⁹⁹ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 162

¹⁰⁰ Epic. Ep. Men. 131

it.

Woolf disagrees that what is being put forward is an active attempt to avoid luxury in order to get us used to the bare minimum for contentment. On the contrary, *going out of our way* to live an ascetic life while luxuries are easily available goes against Epicurean teachings: what is good is easy to obtain, while the things we need to strive for are unimportant. Accepting the minimum required for us to lead a complete life is not a matter of practice, but of thought. Woolf points to the Epicurean method for becoming accustomed to the idea of death: considering it carefully and realising there is nothing to be afraid of. One cannot become habituated to death by experiencing it; likewise, we do not need to experience a life without luxury in order to learn to be content with it.¹⁰¹

Still, Epicurus only refers to 'intervals' of luxury – even if we can mentally prepare ourselves for simple ataraxia amidst endless luxury, would that mental preparation protect us from developing harmful desires? Woolf doesn't consider this to be too much of a problem, as luxury is something that rarely comes our way. Even if it did, extended periods of luxury won't corrupt or disrupt someone who is truly accepting of simplicity.

This is quite a bold claim by Woolf. Could someone constantly surrounded by the most profligate luxuries nevertheless embrace the ideal of simplicity so completely that they would not suffer at all when their luxuries were suddenly taken away? Woolf admits this difficulty and suggests that some people, like those born into luxury, may need to spend some time without their luxuries in order to get used to simplicity, but insists that the psychological method should be all that's required.

That this method is challenging is not necessarily a point against it: mastering Epicureanism involves changing one's thinking in lots of ways, some more difficult than others. Woolf only needs to be right in theory: in practice, it may be that some would-be Epicureans find that accustoming themselves to the minimum of needs is easier without the distraction of luxuries.

Let's concede that luxury is not inherently corrupting and that, provided we remain willing to accept simplicity, it is not harmful. Woolf's much more contentious point is this: that, given the choice, we may be justified in *choosing* luxury. This reading of Epicurus seems to go directly against one of his cardinal principles: lack of pain in body and mind is the limit beyond which happiness and pleasure can only be varied, not increased. Woolf interprets this passage -

¹⁰¹ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 164

We consider self-sufficiency a great good, not in order that in all circumstances we use little, but so that, if we do not have much, we be satisfied with little.¹⁰²

- not to mean that being satisfied with little is the best-case scenario, but rather that it is an acceptable state of affairs when the better option (luxury) is not available.¹⁰³ Certainly, one of Epicurus' strongest arguments for the simple life is that it is easy to obtain. However, it's not immediately clear that he viewed complete mental and physical satisfaction as merely an acceptable consolation when luxurious pleasures are hard to come by. Quite the opposite; the reading more consistent with the rest of Epicurus' writings is that a state of complete satisfaction *cannot be bettered*.

Let us take this passage, also from *Menoceus*:

It is on this account that we do everything we do – to achieve freedom from pain and freedom from fear. When once we come by this, the tumult in the soul is calmed and the human being does not have to go about looking for something that is lacking or to search for something additional with which to supplement the body. Accordingly we have need of pleasure only when we feel pain because of the absence of pleasure, but whenever we do not feel pain we have no need of pleasure.¹⁰⁴

At first glance, this passage doesn't lend itself well to Woolf's interpretation. The goal of Epicureanism is clearly stated to be a state of freedom from mental and physical pain: this is the ultimate aim, not a contingency plan or an acceptable backup. Once this is achieved we don't need anything else, especially additional (kinetic) pleasure, which is only required when we are in pain.

We don't *need* additional pleasure, Woolf agrees, but that doesn't mean that we can't or shouldn't attain it. Epicurus' very disdain for profligate pleasures is itself proof that there are, for him, pleasures separate to and outside of contentment and lack of pain. It is another matter whether these positive pleasures are *valuable* to someone who already has

¹⁰² Epic. Ep. Men. 130

¹⁰³ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 161

¹⁰⁴ Epic. Ep. Men. 128

complete contentment. Woolf firmly believes that Epicurus advocates choosing things for reasons other than need. 'Equipped with the belief that little will always suffice, we should indeed choose plenty where available.'¹⁰⁵ But why? If the ultimate good is the absence of pain, what more is there to gain?

In an attempt to answer this, Woolf suggests some ways to interpret the relationship between positive pleasure and painless contentment. The first is to admit, like the Cyrenaics, that pleasure and happiness are distinct, and function differently. This way, we can say that happiness can't be increased above the absence of pain, but pleasure can be. This circumvents the counter-intuitiveness of stating that there is no pleasure over and above the absence of pain. It allows pleasant things to be chosen after contentment has been reached – chosen because they supply pleasure, not happiness.¹⁰⁶

This interpretation implies that there is pleasure *above and beyond* that which is required for happiness. This claim, supported by a tentative interpretation of *Menoceus*, is, as Woolf himself points out, scuppered by an examination of the *Principle Doctrines*. Doctrine 18 begins 'Bodily pleasure is not enlarged once the pains brought on by need have been done away with; it is only diversified.' This makes it clear that it is not just happiness (as distinct from pleasure) that has its upper limit in painlessness, but pleasure itself. This comes as something as a relief for those who would interpret Epicurus as a hedonist, as Woolf's first option (that happiness and the good life are not the same as pleasure) threatens to push Epicurus out of hedonistic territory entirely.

So, what's the alternative? Woolf's second suggestion is that happiness is identical to pleasure, but to one form in particular rather than to all pleasure. This relies on the distinction between *katastemic* and *kinetic* pleasures.¹⁰⁷ The state of mental and physical painlessness is the limit of *katastemic* or static pleasure. Beyond this, happiness cannot be increased, but kinetic pleasures can be. This new formulation achieves two things: it satisfies hedonism by equating happiness with a kind of pleasure and it allows (kinetic) pleasures to increase above the threshold of painlessness. This version makes much better sense of Epicurus' disavowal of the 'pleasures of the profligate', which suggests two distinct forms of pleasure, only one of which is to be pursued by the Epicurean.¹⁰⁸ However, it still fails to deal with the Epicurus' problematic reference to painlessness as the limit of *all* bodily pleasure.

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, R. (2009) pp. 162

¹⁰⁶ pp. 169

¹⁰⁷ pp. 170

¹⁰⁸ pp. 171

The critical failure of both interpretations stems from Woolf's insistence that pleasure can increase beyond and above contentment and the absence of pain. Whether we say that pleasure can increase without increasing happiness, or that kinetic pleasure can increase beyond the katastemic, Woolf's solutions are not Epicurean. Contentment is the absolute limit of bodily pleasure, as expressed clearly in Doctrine 18; beyond that there is only variation. Woolf's efforts are clearly prompted by the common-sense observation that things can always feel better; therefore, he concludes that the absence of pain can't be the limit that Epicurus says it is. Trying to save Epicureanism by rejecting one of its central principles is not the answer, however: it would either make pleasure not equal the good or impose a non-hedonic condition on *which* pleasures are valuable.

8.3ii

Why contentment is the limit of pleasure

Where Woolf is correct is in focussing on the kinetic/katastemic distinction. The two types do operate differently, but they are both pleasure and therefore cannot increase beyond contentment. Instead, we should focus on the remedial quality of the kinetic pleasures. The key doctrine states that pleasure stops increasing when the pains of need are done away with. This makes the mere absence of pain the *greatest possible pleasure*, which does seem contrary to our everyday experience. Rather than deny the hard limit like Woolf does, the solution to this dissonance is to re-evaluate our thinking about what contentment is. Since, in nearly all circumstances, we can be feeling *more* pleasure, true Epicurean contentment must be something we achieve very rarely, setting it apart from our everyday use of the term.

Let us refer to Epicurean contentment, for the moment, as a state of 'perfection.' This will strip it of its apparent mundaneness. For a trained Epicurean, a state of perfection may not be difficult to attain, but for the rest of us, burdened as we are with a thousand worries and doubts and pampered to the point where we can find a hundred uncomfortable spots on a soft bed, a state where *absolutely nothing is wrong at all* may seem like an impossible dream. This is where the intuition that there is always more positive pleasure to be had comes from: our state of everyday contentment (where everything is basically sort of okay) leaves more to be desired, whereas Epicurean perfection doesn't. We have been working backwards – trying to imagine a state of 'mere' painlessness and wondering how that could be the highest pleasure. Instead, we should imagine the highest possible pleasure and use that to understand what contentment really is. The real trick to

Epicureanism is training ourselves to achieve that level of pleasure *easily* and *reliably*, by removing the unsatisfied desires and worries that reduce our level of pleasure.

The difficulty of reaching and maintaining Epicurean contentment thus provides an explanation for why we always seem capable of more pleasure: even the smallest amount of discontent allows kinetic pleasure to improve our lives through the remedial removal of that pain. For the modern non-Epicurean, pain and discontent are nearly always present in some form or other, so an increase in pleasure is always available.

With this in mind, let us reconsider Woolf's question: once we have achieved contentment, or tranquillity, *should* the Epicurean choose luxury, or additional kinetic pleasure? The answer is clearly not, because further pleasure at this point is not simply undesirable but unimaginable in principle. Once the aim of life has been achieved, there is no more room for kinetic pleasure, which only serves to bump us up, as it were, to the level of static contentment. 'Positive' pleasure is, at this stage, *impossible*: there is nowhere to go from here except down.

Epicurus is explicit when he says that 'the human being does not have to go about looking for something that is lacking or to search for something additional'. The contented person has no more requirement, and indeed no more capacity, for pleasure. This is not to say that we should *avoid* luxuries, provided that they do no harm to our ability to be content, but there is no imperative to look for or take them, even if their acquisition is effortless. They become, at the point of tranquillity, an irrelevance, an indifferent. If this seems strange to us, I believe it is because we are very rarely at this stage of complete contentment. In the vast majority of cases (for an untrained Epicurean, at least) luxuries *do* add something. They contribute to the removal of pain, and if they provide more pleasure than the effort of taking them causes distress, then we have an Epicurean reason to pursue them. For a trained Epicurean, this will occur less and less as their needs diminish and tranquillity becomes easier to acquire.

9

Desire

Desire and pleasure are intimately connected for Epicureanism. Unsatisfied desires are a cause of pain and satisfied desires provide states of pleasure. To help ensure the absence of painful wants, Epicurus gives a detailed account of different desires and guidance on whether they should be satisfied or gotten rid of. The basic distinction is between those desires which are natural and those which are unnatural. Natural desires are then further

divided into the necessary and unnecessary.

Natural and necessary desires are the only one that Epicurus approves of, and the only ones that he does not instruct his followers to eliminate. The first question is how Epicurus defines natural desire. It is not enough for these desires to be based on true beliefs, says Annas – they must also stem from human nature.¹⁰⁹ In other words, these desires do not have to be learned – they are what O’Keefe calls ‘hard-wired’ into us.¹¹⁰ Instinctively we want food, shelter and sex. Today we might explain such desires as evolutionary imperatives.

Natural desires are then divided into the necessary and unnecessary. What the objects of necessary desires are necessary *for* seems to be slightly variable: some are necessary to live, such as food and water, others to live without trouble, like warmth and shelter.¹¹¹ These desires have natural limits and are supposedly easy to satisfy, especially if one have friends who are willing to help. Then there are the natural desires which are unnecessary: particular favourite foods, alcohol and sex. These provide variety of pleasure, but do not remove pain any better than the simplest necessities. Although natural in origin, these desires are fed and exacerbated by groundless opinion. Where the necessary is naturally limited, these desires continue to expand without limit. Difficult to satisfy and offering little in the way of pain relief, they are spurned by Epicurus. One can, and indeed should, enjoy these sorts of pleasures whenever they can be obtained without difficulty – Epicureans are actually those best positioned to enjoy sumptuous food¹¹² – but what must be avoided is *desire*, that is to be in want of something and suffer in its absence.

The last category consists of those desires which are unnatural, which Epicurus calls vain and empty. These include desires for fame, power and wealth. They are not at all instinctive, instead being born of corrupting influences - the fashions and values of society. They are based on ignorance – false presumptions of what we need. The key to identifying these unhealthy urges is that satisfying them does not remove any pain and makes us no better off. Epicurus is no prude or moralising puritan: if fame and wealth really did free us of our pains and elevate us to perfect peace of body and mind then he would heartily recommend pursuing them. As it happens, this is not the case. Unlike the limited natural desires, the unnatural desires are impossible to satisfy, expanding endlessly into greater

¹⁰⁹ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 190

¹¹⁰ O’Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 124

¹¹¹ Epic. Ep. Men. 127

¹¹² 131

need and hunger for useless things. Not only that, desires in this category often involve conflict and competition with others, especially when the desire is to be *more* famous or wealthy than others. Competition with others inevitably means that someone will fail to have their desires satisfied and that may well be us – far better to not have such desires.

On the surface, the Epicurean account of desire is simple and logical: desiring things we don't have makes us unhappy, as does fearing the loss of the things we do have. The person who desires nothing other than what is necessary is therefore largely insulated against unhappiness and harm. What does this mean in practice? The Epicurean has to scrutinise their desires, identifying their value and their dangers, with help from Epicurus' classifications. If there is any doubt or lack of clarity in the distinguishing of necessary desires from unnecessary, we will struggle to end up with the right set of desires to guarantee our happiness.

9.1

Natural desires: necessary and unnecessary

Necessary natural desires are those whose objects are physically necessary for us, in the sense that without them we suffer physical pain. They include the desire for food in general, and for shelter. Unnecessary natural desires include the desire for particular foods (as distinct from food in general), for sex, or for anything which we instinctively want but which exceeds, in terms of quantity or quality, the bare minimum required for the absence of physical pain. Let us examine this distinction and see how easy it is to separate the necessary from the unnecessary.

Food seems to be the most obvious example of something necessary for freedom from pain. Without it, we soon find ourselves afflicted by the pain of hunger. Being without food is *in itself* an evil for this reason, rather than being bad because we are missing something that we desire. There is no harm in a desire for food because it tells us what is true: we should try to obtain enough food that we do not feel hunger. However, desires for specific foods are, though natural, unnecessary:

If interest is intense in the case of those natural desires that do not lead to physical pain when they are not satisfied, then such desires are generated by idle fancy, and it is not because of their own nature

that they are not dissipated but because of the person's own senseless whims.¹¹³

Take, for example, the desire for chocolate cake. The absence of this food in particular does not cause physical pain. All distress associated with the absence of chocolate cake we can lay at the door of 'idle fancy.' The specific desire for chocolate cake is thus something harmful. Burdened by this desire, either we lack chocolate cake or we have it. In the former case, we experience distress and want. In the latter, we are satisfied, but no more than we would be if we had only the basic and necessary desire for food. There is no benefit, only risk.

This approach may at first appear rather ascetic and grey for a hedonistic philosophy. We are supposed to pursue only sustenance and eschew delicacies and sex: Epicurus could hardly be less of an 'Epicure'. It is one thing to reject unnatural desires, but do we really need to be so stingy when it comes to pursuing what our bodies naturally hunger for? Let us take Epicurus' somewhat matronly disapproval of sex:

I learn from your letter that carnal disturbances make you excessively inclined to sexual intercourse. Well, so long as you do not break any laws or disturb well-established conventions or annoy any of your neighbours or wear down your body or use up your funds, you may carry out your own plans as you like. However, it is impossible not to be affected by at least one of these things. Sex never benefited any man, and it's a marvel if it hasn't injured him!¹¹⁴

The first thing we should note is that Epicurus' concerns about sex seem to be a little unrealistic. Perhaps in Epicurus' Athens, sex was a risky business, but today it's quite possible to have sex without incurring a heart attack or a police caution. A sex life that is dangerous and is likely to incur some kind of harm is something that it makes sense to avoid if we want to live a peaceful and contented life, but that surely doesn't apply to sex in general. In Epicurus' own words, we can carry out our plans as we like, provided we avoid pain. The last point still stands, however: sex can't improve the life of someone who is

¹¹³ Epic. L.D. 30

¹¹⁴ Epic. V.C. 51

already content (as long as painlessness really is the limit of pleasure), and the desire for it, like any desire, is a potential source of pain.

Clearly, this is a problem for some people more than others. Some people, presumably including Epicurus himself, do not want sex at all. Other people are sex addicts, and there is a continuum between the two. The first group is not at risk from sexual frustration, while the second group is very vulnerable to it. The same can be said for food: some need more food to satiate their hunger than others, although no-one can survive with no sustenance at all. Those with greater wants require more luck or hard work in order to avoid pain. Recall these comments from *Menoceus*:

In addition, we consider limitation of the appetites a major good, and we recommend this practice not for the purpose of enjoying just a few things and no more but rather for the purpose of enjoying those few in case we do not have much. We are firmly convinced that those who need expensive fare least are the ones who relish it most keenly and that a natural way of life is easily procured, while trivialities are hard to come by.¹¹⁵

Hence becoming habituated to a simple rather than a lavish way of life provides us with the full complement of health; it makes a person ready for the necessary business of life; it puts us in a position of advantage when we happen upon sumptuous fare at intervals and prepares us to be fearless in facing fortune.¹¹⁶

Habituation is perhaps the most important Epicurean technique: the whole philosophy focusses on limiting and changing one's desires in order to avoid unnecessary pain. By realising we don't need certain things and that they don't have value, we can reduce and eventually eliminate our desire for them. This process can involve both introspection – i.e. thinking about the objects of desire and questioning why we want them – and practice, such as living in a simpler fashion and realising that we are satisfied with less. The priority targets of this technique should of course be the damaging unnatural desires and then the risky unnecessary ones, but it's also worth a shot to reduce those that are necessary. We

¹¹⁵ Epic. Ep. Men. 130

¹¹⁶ 131

may be able to survive on less food and comfort without pain, which would greatly reduce the relatively minor risk of discontent that remains when unnecessary desires are removed.

Even if we work to habituate ourselves to be satisfied with less, there will always be some desires that remain, and continue to distress us to at least a small extent. We will always desire some food and warmth. However, this is not a problem, as we have seen, since food and warmth are both biological needs. Sex is a different matter. Since lack of it does not cause physical harm, it would be better not to want it at all. All sex does is sooth a pang that needn't be there in the first place. Ideally, we would have a naturally low sex drive, or habituate ourselves to not want sex. As that may not be possible, the desire should be managed sensibly, like hunger, so it doesn't become a burden or a pain.

It may seem odd for Epicurus to talk of the Epicurean relishing expensive food more keenly than others do, or being in a position of advantage when provided with it. Expensive food does not, after all, remove the pain of hunger any more than plain fare, and a good Epicurean has no other desires around food. Therefore, Epicurus cannot be saying that fancy foods provide *more* pleasure because they remove *more* pain. Instead, when an Epicurean chances across expensive fare, she does so in a body that is without pain and with an untroubled mind. The Epicurean would be just as well-off with simple food, but is in a vastly better position to enjoy the delicacies than the other people at the feast, whose pleasure will be spoiled by their other discomforts and concerns. The Epicurean's pleasure will be the maximum possible, which does not increase but does vary: food, sex, music and helping others are all enjoyed to the fullest extent and in the absence of pain, which is denied to the non-Epicurean. It doesn't matter what the Epicurean is currently doing: as long as they are doing it while possessing ataraxia and aponia, it is the most pleasurable activity there is. This aspect of Epicurean pleasure will be explored more thoroughly in Part 3.

It's worth noting that certain natural but unnecessary desires are commonly regarded as valuable in themselves. A connoisseur who dines only on the finest dishes is regarded as a person of taste, while a flagging sex drive is seen as a problem that needs to be remedied. From an Epicurean point of view, this makes little sense: the more intense and specific someone's desires, the more open that person is to harm and anticipation of harm, whereas someone with few desires has a better chance of complete and persistent pleasure. In contrast to the desires themselves, these desires-about-desires are not natural: they stem from society's opinions about what is valuable or praiseworthy, and

should therefore be classified as unnatural and discarded. If being a picky eater were valuable or useful for leading a pleasant life, then all power to the connoisseur, but since choosiness makes us more vulnerable to frustration, we should avoid such desires.

9.2

Unnatural desires

Let's examine the 'empty and vain' desires now, as these are the ones that must be most urgently exorcized. Epicurus' main objection to attempting to satisfy these desires is that 1) they are impossible to completely fulfil, always expanding beyond our means, and that 2) even were they to be temporarily fulfilled, such fulfilment wouldn't counter any serious pains and would carry with it a fear of loss. Having such desires can, therefore, only be detrimental to us: if satisfied, they provide nothing of value, and if unsatisfied, their presence is painful. If we are to agree with Epicurus that the empty and vain desires are best expunged, we need to establish the truth of his two claims: one, that they do us *no good*, and two, that they *actively do us harm*.

As for the first claim, it is not immediately obvious that wealth and power do us no good. Our goal is a state free from mental and physical pain. Surely these worldly goods would put us in a better place to ensure this. The wealthy are less likely to suffer from hunger. In addition, they *know* that they won't go without, so the associated mental pains are also banished. Of course, it may be that, on balance, it is best not to desire such things because the pain and loss of failure to achieve them outweighs the benefits of having them, but that is not the same as there being no value to them at all.

Epicurus makes it clear that he doesn't ascribe much to wealth in the way of instrumental value: 'Spiritual disorder cannot be resolved – or joy worthy of the name produced – by wealth however great, by popular acclaim and respect, or by anything that causes unrestrained desire.'¹¹⁷ However, this statement doesn't specifically deny that wealth and power can help alleviate physical pain, which is certainly an Epicurean good. Elsewhere Epicurus writes: 'All desires that do not lead to physical pain if not satisfied are unnecessary.'¹¹⁸ Clearly, desires for wealth and power fall into this category: lack of money does not, in itself, cause physical pain. Lack of food, on the other hand, very much does,

¹¹⁷ Epic. V.C. 81

¹¹⁸ Epic. L.D. 26

and someone who possesses money is more likely to be able to avoid hunger.

It would appear that money is *useful* to us in our attempts to achieve freedom from pain. The question is whether or not that usefulness is enough to justify a desire for money itself. Desires are not entertained lightly by Epicurus, because of the inherent risks they pose: having a desire that is not satisfied leads to a mental pain.

What we require is food. We suffer pain if we are without it. Therefore, it makes sense to desire it. Not only does the power of food to remove the pains of hunger mean that food is *worthy*, for want of a better word, of desire – there is also no real risk in desiring it. Wanting something opens us up to the pain of lacking it, but the lack of food is already painful, in a purely physical way. The pain of not having wealth can be traced to an unfulfilled desire for that wealth, but that is not the case with the pain of hunger. Perhaps the mental pain of not having the food we desire would add to the physical distress, but it is not the case that by removing our desires we could remove the pain.

The case of wealth is clearly very different from that of food. Since lack of wealth is not physically painful, it can only pain those who desire wealth, making the desire for wealth a risky business. Since we cannot be certain of having money, the mental pains stemming from currently not having any, or from the fear of losing it in the future, are a permanent threat to the money-desirer. Can we justify those real and potential mental pains by money’s instrumental value, namely that money gives us a good chance of defending ourselves from cold and hunger, which are things we need to avoid?

| Jack (desires money) | Jill (does not desire money) |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Has neither money nor food (X) | 1. Has neither money nor food (X) |
| • Has food but not money (X) | 2. Has food but not money |
| • Has money but not food (X) | 3. Has money but not food (X) |
| • Has both food and money | 4. Has both food and money |

This table compares the person who desires money (Jack) with the person who does not (Jill). Each faces four potential situations. Situations that result in distress are marked with an X. Obviously, being hungry and penniless is distressing for both, and being rich and well-fed is pleasant for both. Having money but no food is the same for both: neither has an *unsatisfied* desire for money (either because the desire is satisfied or because the desire does not exist), and both have an unsatisfied desire for food. They are equally afflicted by hunger. The only case in which difference occurs is when food is present but

money is not. Jill is completely satisfied, whereas Jack, despite his full belly, is saddened by his empty coffers. If we do not know what situation we are going to face, surely it is better to be Jill.

It is easy to demonstrate the dangers of desires: the more one has, the greater the likelihood of dissatisfaction. What about the benefits of desire? One might argue that Jack's desire for money is a motivational force. He is, thanks to his desire, more likely to try to attain money. Even if this is true, however, it does not greatly help. Even if he works so diligently that there is a 99% probability that he will not have an *unsatisfied* and painful desire for money, this pales next to Jill's absolute certainty that she will not have such an unsatisfied desire: if she doesn't want money, she can never be 'in want' of it.

Of course, we can argue that, with the money he has earned, Jack is less likely to be unable to buy food, and therefore less likely than Jill to have any unsatisfied desires at all – although we should note that, to avoid dissatisfaction, Jack would need enough money for food *and* enough money to satisfy his desire for wealth in itself. It doesn't take much examination to see the flaw in an argument of this kind. It may well be true that Jack's desire for money makes him more likely to attain it (this is not unreasonable, given the powerful motivational force that desires can have), but we should remember that Jill desires food in the same way. She may work the same hours as Jack to earn money to buy food with. Anyone who understands that things like wealth and power and respect can have instrumental value for the purpose of attaining necessary goods will be as likely to gain and use such things as those who desire wealth and power in themselves. The only difference is that Jill has fewer things she desires in themselves, and therefore she has fewer opportunities for dissatisfaction. No matter how useful the instrument is, desiring it for itself, *in addition* to the end product, presents only dangers, not benefits.

One thing about Epicurus' view of pleasure that may be hard to stomach is that it is entirely negative. Although it is true that every desire brings with it an increased chance of dissatisfaction and distress, not much attention is paid to the benefits of desires which are successfully satisfied. Let us take the money-but-no-food situation facing Jack and Jill. As we have said, both experience the pain of hunger, and neither feels a lack of money. However, is there really no difference at all between rich Jill, who is indifferent to money, and rich Jack, who values money more than anything? Unsatisfied desires are painful, but are satisfied ones really no better than having no desires at all? According to the Epicurean account of desire, achieving one's heart's desire is no better than not having one.

This leads to what I consider to be a major stumbling block for those of us who

come at Epicureanism from a modern capitalist perspective. Although this philosophy is not at all ascetic, it is disconcertingly hostile to desire. We are more accustomed to the notion that the bigger our hopes and dreams the better. If we fail to satisfy our grand desires then we will suffer, it's true, but at least we will have tried. Those people who lack desire, we think, may be content, but they have no chance of attaining anything great. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Indeed, there seems to be something timid about limiting desires to avoid dissatisfaction.

Making sense of Epicurus' counter-intuitive claims about desire is very similar to confronting the difficulties around the limits of pleasure. What must be demonstrated is that additional, unnecessary desires (even when satisfied) don't add anything. This is not as difficult as first appears, as long as we remember that pleasure cannot be extended beyond the point of contentment: perfect contentment is so complete that it cannot be bettered. Referring to this state as one of having no desires is misleading, and it is no wonder that this sounds unattractive. More accurately, this state is one of having *every desire fulfilled*, which means having everything we want now, and being completely confident of getting everything we want in the future. By definition, the fully-satisfied person can't gain any more satisfaction. Additional desires create pain, and satisfying those desires removes that pain. Therefore, it is true that continually satisfying more desires does provide more pleasure, but only by creating more discontent to dispel, and the level of pleasure and satisfaction, even with constant success, never rises above that of the person who is content with little.

This should mean, if our understanding of Epicurus is correct, that in the last scenario, that of having both money and food, Jack loses any advantage. Jill is *perfectly* content, as all of her desires are satisfied. Can we really say that Jack is any better off, in any meaningful way, given that both have everything they want? If we remember that the state of all-desires-satisfied is one of *perfection*, rather than mere contentment, it seems clear that additional desires have no power to better that situation.

9.2i

The dangers of unnatural desires

Unnatural desires, those which are empty and vain, are not just useless. They are actively harmful. Obviously, having any desire brings with it the danger of dissatisfaction, but there is something about the desires for wealth, power and respect that makes them especially harmful to us. What does Epicurus mean by 'unnatural'? O'Keefe distinguishes unnatural

desires by their source: outside of society, there is no way we would come by such desires, unlike the natural (but potentially unnecessary) desires for food and sex. We could debate whether the desire to be celebrated and dominant is truly alien to our natures, but what we really want to know is whether these desires are as *harmful* as Epicurus says. O’Keefe provides this list of their dangers:

1. They are based on false opinions about what I need.
2. They increase without limit and therefore cannot be satisfied.
3. They bring us into conflict with other people.¹¹⁹

The first point further indicates the uselessness of such desires. We cannot be said to be in want of power or wealth, because we don’t suffer in their absence. If we agree with Epicurus that complete contentment can’t be bettered, then desiring anything that doesn’t cause suffering in its absence can only be a liability.

It is the other two points that really mark the unnatural desires out as dangerous. It is one thing for a desire to be a superfluous risk – it *may* not be satisfied. It is quite another for that desire to be a guaranteed source of misery, and this is what the Epicurean takes unnatural desires to be. Let us take Jack’s avarice, for example. Talk of ‘desire for money’ might seem a bit vague. The desires we might actually have would be more along the lines of ‘I want a hundred thousand pounds’ or ‘I want enough to buy a mansion’ or something of this sort. Such desires are risky of course, but if satisfied we might still be perfectly content. However, the Epicurean problem is this: Jack manages to get hold of a hundred thousand pounds. Assuming he has no other desires, Jack is fully content. However, Jack soon finds himself not completely content. This is because he has now set his sights higher and his desire has grown: what he wants now is two hundred thousand pounds. This can go on infinitely; thus, such desires can only be a perpetual source of dissatisfaction and mental pain: ‘Nothing is sufficient for the person who finds sufficiency too little.’¹²⁰

Is this an accurate account of human desire and motivation? Proving any such claim would surely mire us in complex psychological analysis, and the results would be unlikely to hold equally true for everyone. Perhaps having a hundred thousand pounds would provide complete and perfect solace for Jack, provided he could hold on to it. But

¹¹⁹ O’Keefe, T. (2012) pp. 125

¹²⁰ Epic. V.C. 68

Epicurus' point is logical, not empirical: absence of money does not cause physical pain, therefore acquiring money does not remove physical pain. Thus, there is no point where it makes sense to say one has *enough* money. Whatever quantity of money is desired is arbitrary. If Jack really remains content with his original amount, then one hundred thousand pounds is either wanted *instrumentally*, and is therefore not the true source of desire, or the sum has been chosen for some completely arbitrary reason. Jack might possibly have some fixation with this number, but the desire for money cannot be satisfied in the way the desire for food can be satisfied, because there is no point where the problem of its absence goes away.

We can object to this with line of thought the observation that, although limits on how much wealth or fame we desire may be arbitrary, they can still be stable. We might want to be the best-known person in a small village, for example. This desire doesn't grow, because we don't care about being known beyond the village, and having it fulfilled makes all the difference between being happy and being discontent. This would be an example of an unnatural desire that can be easily fulfilled (assuming that I *am* the most famous person in the village and that is why this matters to me) and does not grow in a damaging way. Instead of harming me, we can argue that this desire simply raises my standards. I demand not just the absence of pain, but also my local fame, and as long as I maintain both, I am unharmed.

From an Epicurean point of view, we can see why this objection fails. Firstly, we cannot say that now seek a standard of living above the level of painlessness. If being well-known is something we desire, then being unknown is a source of distress. Therefore, we still require only the absence of pain, but have allowed being unknown to unnecessarily cause us pain. Along with food and shelter and lack of injury, fame is one more requirement, one more source of distress that has to be constantly managed. This extra burden is not inconsiderable, even if it never grows and is always fulfilled. To desire something is to be distressed by its absence, in anticipation if not in reality: if I care so much that everyone knows me, surely I must worry at least a little that this may not always be the case. In this way, even the most tightly contained and constantly fulfilled unnatural desire makes us less at peace, and worse off.

We should also question the claim that one can entertain an unnatural desire without it expanding and becoming increasingly difficult to fulfil. The issue is not that desires grow of their own accord. Desires do not appear from nowhere, but depend on the values that we hold. If I care about my personal fame, this demonstrates that I consider recognition to be valuable. It is this underlying value that is the real danger, and it is fed

and reinforced by persistently pursuing recognition and being rewarded (by the removal of distress) for attaining it. As long as I hold that value, any number of unnatural desires can be formed and increased, bringing with them more pressures and dissatisfactions. Of course, my wanting to be recognised in my village doesn't necessarily lead to craving international applause, but it is extremely likely that my esteem for fame will lead to a host of specific desires: recognition from *this* person, being better known in the local pub than my neighbour, and so on. A single mistaken value is a huge vulnerability, because that value tells me I need many things, the absence of any one of which pains me to some degree.

Finally, we have the problem of interpersonal conflict. If I want a hundred thousand pounds, satisfaction depends solely my acquisition of wealth. If, on the other hand, I want to have *more* money than my rival, my success is dependent both on my stock of money and on his, increasing the possibility of dissatisfaction. Lots of people can be rich, but to be the very richest is much harder: what are the chances that that will be you? Satisfying a competitive desire is harder than satisfying a non-competitive one, but maintaining that satisfaction is even harder. I need only hang on to my money to keep my non-competitive desire fulfilled, but to remain the very richest, I have to keep a constant eye on everyone else's finances. Whether or not the *possession* of wealth or power or respect affects the happiness of one's life, I think Epicurus has good reason for supposing the *desire* for these things brings us nothing but harm. When it comes to developing our strategies for how to live, removing these desires has to be considered a priority.

10

Virtue

Epicureanism is an ethical theory. In addition to pleasure or happiness, it is concerned with right or virtuous action. The relationship between virtue and pleasure is a complex one, and is variously interpreted by the different philosophical schools. Most interpretations of Epicurus attribute to him a consequentialist view, one that is in keeping with a purely hedonistic value system: the virtues, including wisdom and justice, are valuable only instrumentally – they are required for pleasure.

'It is impossible' says Epicurus, 'to live the pleasant Epicurean life without also living sensibly, nobly, and justly and, vice versa, that it is impossible to live sensibly, nobly and

justly without living pleasantly.¹²¹ In other words, living virtuously is coextensive with living free from pain. What has to be established (in addition to whether or not this is, in fact, true) is exactly what form this relationship takes. If the value of virtue lies only in its effectiveness as a tool for attaining pleasure, that would sharply contrast with the Stoic or Aristotelian views of virtue and virtuous activity being supreme goods in their own right. It would also imply that the link between virtue and pleasure is contingent – it just so happens, given the way that the world is, that virtue leads to happiness. Were conditions otherwise, virtue would be worthless.

It's certainly not unreasonable to posit that living a life of moderation, kindness and generosity gives one better odds of enjoying pleasurable states. Stripping virtue of all intrinsic value, on the other hand, is a drastic step and should not be made without a very careful examination of what supposedly makes the virtues good. I want to argue firstly that Epicurus is best interpreted as attaching only instrumental value to virtue and, secondly, that he is right to do so.

10.1

Intrinsic value of the virtues in Epicureanism

In *The Morality of Happiness*, Julia Annas argues that the understanding of Epicurus as a virtue instrumentalist is mistaken, and that he is best understood as attaching intrinsic value to the virtues. This is because, Annas argues, Epicurus shares the active, holistic view of the good life that is common to all ancient philosophers. Annas turns to this passage from Arius to sum up this 'eudaimonistic' understanding of the good life:

Since the superiority of virtue is great both in what it can produce and in being chosen for its own sake by comparison with the bodily and external goods, it accords with reason that our final end (telos) is not a fulfilment (sumplērōma) of bodily and external goods, nor getting them, but rather living according to virtue among all or most and the most important bodily and external goods.¹²²

¹²¹ Epic. Ep. Men. 132

¹²² Ar. Did.126.12–18

‘This idea,’ writes Annas, ‘that my final end or goal essentially involves my own activity, and is not a good that others could just as well get for me, is important for our understanding of the ancient theories. It goes some way towards explaining the almost complete absence in ancient ethics of anything resembling consequentialist ideas. The object of my rational overall aim is my acting in one way rather than another, my getting or using goods rather than just the goods themselves. Thus my final good could not be a good thing, but neither could it just be a good state of affairs’¹²³

This take on eudaimonia fits Stoicism and Aristotle very well, but I’m not sure that it applies to Epicurus. So far, the Epicurean idea of the good has seemed very much consequentialist: what mattered to Epicurus was achieving the state of ataraxia. Annas, however, rejects this interpretation:

...Epicureanism is not consequentialist; its conception of the kind of pleasure which is our final end does not make that a state of affairs to the achievement of which the nature of our actions in achieving it is irrelevant. This is because Epicurus takes the eudaimonist framework of ancient ethics seriously.¹²⁴

On Annas’ reading of Epicurus, the ends are not so important as to eclipse the means. As someone who ‘takes the eudaimonist framework of ancient ethics seriously’, Epicurus wouldn’t be so short-sighted as to value only a state of affairs. Instead, Annas attributes to Epicurus the view that virtuous action is *part* of our final end, not just a means to it.¹²⁵ But Annas has to confront the various passages attributed to Epicurus that suggest a pronounced lean towards consequentialism. A major piece of evidence for this view is this passage from the *Letter to Menoeceus*, which gives, says Annas, a false impression:

Since this [pleasure] is the primary aim and is innate to us—for that reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass

¹²³ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 37

¹²⁴ pp. 37

¹²⁵ pp. 237

over many pleasures, when greater annoyance follows for us from them, and we judge many pains superior to pleasures, when greater pleasure follows along for us when we endure the pains for a long time. Every pleasure, therefore, because of having a nature which is familiar to us [oikeian] is a good, but not every pleasure is to be chosen, just as every pain is a bad thing, but not every pain is always naturally to be avoided. However, one should judge all these matters by measuring together [summetrēsei] and looking at the advantages and disadvantages, for we make use of the good on some occasions as a bad thing, and the bad, conversely, as a good.¹²⁶

The language here is strikingly utilitarian and quantitative, and suggests that decisions should be made based on what the end result will be: preferably a favourable balance of pleasure over pain. This can't be an accurate interpretation of Epicurus, says Annas, because that would mean that Epicurus had abandoned the holistic principles of eudaimonism evident elsewhere in his writings.¹²⁷ Unlike Bentham and Mill, Epicurus was not interested in creating a guide to action in order to better satisfy desires, but rather was concerned with studying and correcting desires, so that one would be happy whatever happens.¹²⁸

It would be impossible not to agree that Epicurus' concern was with how we feel rather than with what occurs, but that does not mean that he considered states of affairs to be unimportant. The *Letter to Menoecus* clearly indicates that Epicurus' primary goal was a particular state of affairs – that of possessing ataraxia – and that the rest of his philosophy is a set of tools for achieving it.

To determine whether or not Epicurus fits Annas' idea of a eudaimonistic ethics, let us set out her criteria for it. Above all else, the final end of any such ethics must be complete and self-sufficient. A complete end is one that, when achieved, leaves the achiever wanting nothing else. A self-sufficient end makes the pursuer's life choiceworthy and not dependent on things external to the life chosen (although it can still be dependent on many things within that kind of life).¹²⁹ This is the classical standard, and any proposed final end that doesn't fulfil these conditions can't be the end goal of a truly eudaimonistic

¹²⁶ Epic. Ep. Men. 129-30

¹²⁷ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 335

¹²⁸ pp. 338

¹²⁹ pp. 41

theory.

Annas considers Epicurean pleasure to fulfil these conditions, in contrast to Cyrenaic pleasure. 'For intuitively nothing can be more obvious than that the kinetic kind of pleasure is not complete and does not render one's life self-sufficient. Pleasure understood as pleasant experience is manifestly not what gives point to all our activities and renders our lives lacking in nothing.'¹³⁰ The Cyrenaic celebration of kinetic pleasure fails to provide an adequate final end. Even when kinetic pleasure is achieved in abundance, there are, to Annas, clearly things missing from one's life because kinetic pleasure doesn't fit the description of a complete and final end. Hence Annas' claim that the Cyrenaics pursued pleasure but not happiness. Epicurus, however, was aware of the requirements for a final end, and so chose a formulation that fitted them. Annas finds support for this idea in Cicero and the *Menoceus*:

Thus we are inquiring what the final and ultimate good is, which, in the opinion of all philosophers ought to be such that everything must be referred to it, but it itself referred no further. Epicurus locates this in pleasure.¹³¹

We should take care for the things that produce happiness, since when it is present we have everything, and when it is absent we do everything to have it. ¹³²

This need to provide a complete and self-sufficient final end is the reason why Epicurus chose as his goal not simply pleasure, but *ataraxia*. *Ataraxia* is all-encompassing as opposed to kinetic pleasure which, although a valuable thing, cannot constitute a complete life. As a hedonist, Epicurus might be expected to have drawn his conception of pleasure closely from experience, as did the Cyrenaics, argues Annas. That didn't is evidence that he was trying to fulfil eudaimonistic criteria.¹³³

Annas draws two conclusions: that Epicurean hedonism is about living life in a

¹³⁰ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 339

¹³¹ Cic. Fin. I.29

¹³² Epic. Ep. Men. 112

¹³³ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 339

particular way rather than about achieving a particular state of affairs, and that virtue plays more than a merely instrumental role in the pleasant life. These two conclusions are connected: if Epicurus only seeks a particular state of affairs, then everything else, including virtue, must be an instrument only. However, if Epicurus is seeking a complete way of being, with an emphasis on how we desire and act, then acting virtuously becomes an integral part of the whole rather than a contingent ladder for attaining pleasure.

Let us examine the first claim: that Epicurean happiness is not just a state of affairs. I agree with Annas that the Epicurean good is complete and self-sufficient. Certainly, Epicurus gives every indication that there is nothing outside of aponia and ataraxia that is important. Other things, like kinetic pleasure, are important, but only because they lead to the static pleasures. That fits very acceptably in the eudaimonistic framework: kinetic pleasures are not external to the pleasant life we have chosen and come under the umbrella of the complete good that is static pleasure. It does not follow, however, that the final good must be an activity rather than a state. It is perfectly reasonable to say that all other ends are subordinate to achieving a state of painlessness. Indeed, later in the same chapter Annas appears to concede that Epicurean happiness resides in the condition of being untroubled, which is because Epicurus has 'radically shifted the application of completeness.'¹³⁴

Our activity is of course important, Annas points out. Various activities, especially self-reflection and deliberation, vastly increase the likelihood of attaining the desired state of pleasure, but it is experiencing that pleasant state that matters. Annas suggests that Epicurus' focus on state rather than activity is the source of contemporary criticisms of passivity.

But what one aims at is not the activity, still less the consequences of the activity, but the resulting condition of static pleasure, ataraxia. Epicurus' thesis that when once we have this, nothing further is gained by going on longer, gives the inner state definite priority over the external achievement—to the extent of denying the importance of our intuitive beliefs about the shape of a developing human life.¹³⁵

From this passage, it appears that Annas' understanding of Epicureanism is more

¹³⁴Annas, J. (1995) pp. 347

¹³⁵pp. 348

utilitarian than first appears: what Epicurus thinks we should be seeking is a state of pleasurable feeling, and everything else (desire, activity, belief) has value only so long as it guides us towards this state. Epicureanism is an inner-state theory in which the only thing that matters is how we feel. It is difficult to reconcile this interpretation with Annas' assertion that Epicurus subscribes to an active, holistic conception of eudaimonia and the view that 'pleasure understood as pleasant experience is manifestly not what gives point to all our activities and renders our lives lacking in nothing.'¹³⁶

Furthermore, Epicurus' insistence that a longer life is not necessarily a better one 'gives the inner state definite priority over the external achievement—to the extent of denying the importance of our intuitive beliefs about the shape of a developing human life.'¹³⁷ Epicurus, then, has deviated significantly from the Aristotelian emphasis on activity. In seeking and valuing only a pleasant state of being, he shows indifference to the whole-life focus of eudaimonistic ethics as interpreted by Annas. Annas believes that Epicurus' philosophy fails because hedonism doesn't, after all, adhere properly to the requirements of the eudaimonistic framework, but I think the repeated insistence on the importance of the *ataraxic* state tells a different story: Epicurus rejects that framework altogether. He simply didn't attach intrinsic value to *how* we live, only to the fact that we live in a state of pleasure.

What about virtue? It is highly prized by Epicurus, but in what capacity? Annas disagrees that the Epicurean view of virtue is purely instrumental. However, she cannot overlook the fact that a few phrases from Diogenes Laertius' and Athenaeus' accounts of Epicurus are strongly supportive of this interpretation. Annas presents them for inspection:

It is because of pleasure that we choose even the virtues, not for their own sake, just as we choose medicine for the sake of health.¹³⁸

One should honour the fine and the virtues and that kind of stuff, if they produce pleasure; but if they don't produce it one should leave them alone.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 339

¹³⁷ pp. 348

¹³⁸ D.L. X 138

¹³⁹ Ath. XII 546f

I spit on the fine and those who emptily admire it, when it doesn't make any pleasure.¹⁴⁰

If these passages are in any way accurate representations of Epicurus' thoughts on the matter, then his view seems very clear: virtue is only valuable as a means to pleasure. Annas tries to explain them away, saying they have been taken out of context, or seeing them as a product of Epicurus' own delight in shocking and offending his contemporaries, rather than as an accurate window onto his views.¹⁴¹ Indeed, she uses these very passages as evidence for the view that Epicurus maintained the intrinsic value of virtue. A true radical hedonist, who considered virtue as purely instrumental to pleasure, would regard courage, for example, as virtuous only to the extent that it disposed the agent to perform difficult actions that result in pleasure. Conventionally courageous actions that led to pain and were done only for virtue's sake would not be considered courageous at all. Such a hedonist could not criticise virtue for not always generating pleasure, because, for such a hedonist, virtuous activity would be defined by its tendency to generate pleasure. But Epicurus is not tempted in this direction. Rather, he assumes that the virtues must be conceived of in the commonsensical way, as dispositions to do the morally right thing, whether or not this produces pleasure. Only so would he find there to be a problem for the hedonist about being committed to virtue.¹⁴²

This argument is not at all convincing. Annas misses the point that Epicurus, in these passages, is using the term 'virtue' in implied quotes, to mean 'what is conventionally called virtue', and his purpose is precisely to *discredit* that understanding of virtue. 'I spit on the fine and those who emptily admire it, when it doesn't make any pleasure' does indeed imply a pleasure-independent conception of the fine, but one that is being critiqued rather than endorsed. Virtue in the traditional sense might or might not produce pleasure. In those cases where it does, it has instrumental value; in cases where it doesn't, it has no value. In other places, for example where Epicurus speaks positively of the virtue of prudence, *then* he is using his own conception of virtue, which is defined hedonistically just as Annas says a true hedonist would do.¹⁴³

These passages make it difficult to interpret Epicurus as someone who regarded virtue as valuable in itself. However, Annas finds better support for her interpretation in

¹⁴⁰ Ath. XII 547a

¹⁴¹ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 341

¹⁴² pp. 340

¹⁴³ Epic. Ep. Men. 132

Epicurus' repeated references to the deep interconnection, indeed exact correlation, between the virtuous life and the pleasant one:

The starting point of this whole scheme and the most important of its values is good judgement, which consequently is more highly esteemed even than philosophy. All the other virtues stem from sound judgement, which shows us that it is impossible to live the pleasant Epicurean life without also living sensibly, nobly, and justly and, vice versa, that it is impossible to live sensibly nobly and justly without living pleasantly. The traditional virtues grow up together with the pleasant life; they are indivisible. Can you think of anyone more moral than the person who has devout beliefs about the gods, who is consistently without fears about death, and who has pondered man's natural end?¹⁴⁴

From this passage in *Menoceus*, Annas concludes that the virtues play a non-instrumental role. They are valuable for their own sake and entail pleasure just as pleasure entails them.¹⁴⁵ However, it does not seem at all obvious to me that this passage demonstrates a non-instrumental role for virtue.

Consider this analogy:

It is not possible to have green paint without mixing blue and yellow paint, nor to mix blue and yellow paint with getting green paint. If a person cannot mix blue and yellow paint, it is impossible for them to have green paint.

Charitably assuming that one cannot buy ready-mixed green paint, this is true. If I want to paint my front door green, then it is clear that the green paint is what is valuable to me. The blue and yellow, although inseparable from the green, are instrumental only. Similarly, the mere fact that it is impossible to live pleasantly without virtue does not confer any non-instrumental value on virtue whatsoever.

If we can find no real evidence for Epicurean virtue being intrinsically valuable, then

¹⁴⁴Epic. Ep. Men. 132

¹⁴⁵ Annas, J. (1995) pp. 341

we have to work out just what form the virtue-pleasure relationship takes. Remember that Epicurus considers it to be impossible to live pleasantly without living virtuously, and vice-versa. We are looking at a 100 per cent correlation between virtue and pleasure, something which is rare in instrumental relationships (a good diet may be instrumental to health, but doesn't guarantee it in all cases). If virtue has no intrinsic value and is not an intrinsic part of the good life, then it follows that there is nothing *necessary* about the relationship between virtue and pleasure. Instead, this relationship is *contingent*: it just so happens that living virtuously is necessary and sufficient for living pleasantly.

This is an extremely bold claim. If virtue is integral to pleasure, then it is easy to guarantee that a virtuous life will be a pleasant one, but Epicurus can't rely on this. Instead, he needs to show empirically that virtue begets pleasure without fail. I can see two ways in which he might do this.

1. Acting virtuously always results in pleasure in that moment.
2. Living virtuously, over one's entire life, always results in a life that is generally pleasant.

Both 1 and 2 fulfil Epicurus' promise that one cannot live virtuously without living pleasantly, but do so over different timescales. 2 is a weaker claim, and allows for times when one is virtuous but not enjoying pleasure. Epicurus equates the virtues not with pleasure, but with the pleasant life, which I think removes the necessity for constant, unfailing pleasure.

At first glance, both 1 and 2 appear false. It is very easy to think of examples, both real and hypothetical, where a life of virtue results in only suffering. The problem with this objection, however, lies in the implied definition of virtue. When he talks scornfully about virtue, as Annas pointed out, Epicurus must be understanding virtue in the conventional, non-hedonistic way – no hedonist would be dismissive of purely pleasure-generating virtues. Since we know just how little Epicurus thinks of conventional virtue, he must have something else in mind when he extols virtue as essential to the good life, a virtue-concept of his own that is entirely hedonistic and both necessary and sufficient for the pleasant life. This seems to be the implication of the following passage:

Can you think of anyone more moral than the person who has devout beliefs about the gods, who is consistently without fears about death, and who has pondered man's natural end?¹⁴⁶

The virtue that is most essential to providing pleasure is not courage or generosity, but wisdom:

The starting point of this whole scheme and the most important of its values is good judgement.¹⁴⁷

A correct comprehension of the fact that death means nothing to us makes the mortal aspect of life pleasurable, not by conferring on us a boundless period of time but by removing the yearning for deathlessness.¹⁴⁸

This is true Epicurean virtue. Believing that nothing is to be feared, that all we need is easily within our grasp, that pain is fleeting and can be overcome, that is what provides pleasure. Does it provide it reliably enough for thesis 1 to be true? No. Perhaps Epicurus was able, as reported, to enjoy pleasurable memories even in the most terrible pains of his illness, but it beggars belief to assume that the wise and prudent experience constant pleasure.

Luckily for Epicurus, that isn't necessary. He refers only to the pleasurable *life*, and there is nothing obviously implausible about a wise and prudent person (that is someone who feels no fear or distress and has great capacity for enduring pain) being guaranteed a life of pleasure. The actual success-rate of the prudent life is still to be tested, but this interpretation is the only one that makes sense both of Epicurus' claim that a virtuous life is a pleasant one and of his scorn of virtues that don't bring pleasure. Prudence is not the only virtue, however:

¹⁴⁶ Epic. Ep. Men. 133

¹⁴⁷ 132

¹⁴⁸ 124

All the other virtues stem from sound judgement, which shows that it is impossible to live the pleasant Epicurean life without also living sensibly, nobly, and justly and, vice versa, that it is impossible to live sensibly nobly and justly without living pleasantly. The traditional virtues grow up together with the pleasant life; they are indivisible.¹⁴⁹

How can we reconcile Epicurus' admiration for living nobly and justly and for the 'traditional virtues' with his obvious contempt of virtues that are valued for their own sake and do not bring pleasure? We must deploy Annas' solution: a hedonist like Epicurus would have redefined the classical virtues so that they, like wisdom, become tools for attaining pleasure and avoiding pain. When he criticizes virtue, Epicurus means non-pleasure-producing, valued-in-itself virtue. When he praises virtue, he means those very same virtues utilized for the purpose of pleasure.

Thus, courage is the absence of distressing fear, kindness helps to build loyal friendships which provide support and protection from harm, temperance prevents the pains that come with over-indulgence, and opposes unnecessary desires. The idea that acting virtuously is pleasant is by no means unique to Epicurus – it appears across Greek philosophy from Aristotle to the Stoics – but the only consistent understanding of Epicurus is that virtue's value lies *solely* in its pleasure-inducing, pain-reducing quality.

Insisting on the intrinsic value of virtue runs utterly contrary to the hedonistic ideals repeated throughout Epicurus' work. Virtues that derive their value from the attainment of pleasure, on the other hand, perfectly complement the idea of pleasure as the final end for which everything is done. The latter understanding is the only consistent way to interpret Epicurus. What remains to be decided is whether he was right. Are virtues only good because they lead to pleasure?

10.2

Virtue as good in itself

Let us first examine the idea that virtue is good or valuable in and of itself, most famously associated with Stoicism. The incoherence of this idea gives us a strong reason for favouring the alternative Epicurean conception.

¹⁴⁹ Epic. Ep. Men. 132

The Stoic school's attitude towards virtue is very straightforward: only virtue has any intrinsic value. This could not be more different from Epicurus, on our instrumentalist reading.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus marks virtue out from everything, attributing progress in life solely to the person

who renounces externals and attends instead to their character, cultivating and perfecting it so that it agrees with nature, making it honest and trustworthy, elevated, free, unchecked and undeterred; and if they've learned that whoever desires or avoids things outside their control cannot be free and faithful, but has to shift and fluctuate right along with them¹⁵⁰

This raises a question: just what is within our control and what is an 'external'? Pleasure, even when carefully monitored and cultivated by an Epicurean sage, can't really be said to be entirely in our control: rather, it is an external that will turn up fairly reliably if we live sensibly and moderate our desires. Even then, though, starvation or illness could take pleasure from us, however well we have prepared.

This leaves only virtue completely in our hands, and if virtue is all that we value there is no need to 'shift and fluctuate' to obtain other things. For the sake of assessing the Stoic argument, let us put aside questions of determinism (and the Stoics' unique formulation of fatalism) and agree for the moment that our characters, and only our characters, are within our power. Is this what gives them value?

To answer this, we need to know what the Stoics considered the state of eudaimonia to consist of. There seems to be some disagreement here between the Stoic sages as to the exact terminology that should be used. Arius Didymus, in his summaries of the Stoic philosophies, attributes the definitions 'a good flow of life' or 'living in agreement' to the Stoic founder Zeno, and the more specific 'living in agreement with nature' to his student Cleanthes.¹⁵¹ Adherence to the flow of nature is held to be integral to the singular value of virtue in Stoic philosophy: in Zeller's summary 'virtue is said to be the only good, because only what is according to nature is a good, and rational conduct is for man the

¹⁵⁰ Epict. I.4.19

¹⁵¹ Ar. Did. 63 A-B

only thing according to nature.’¹⁵²

There are a few problems, notes Zeller, with this explanation of the value of virtue. Firstly, it seems obvious that some things other than rational or virtuous activity are according to nature, such as the impulse towards survival. Secondly, and very problematically for a philosophy to live by, if nothing but virtue has value, there can be no rationale or motive for choosing between things: all outcomes are equally worthless.¹⁵³

The Stoics counteract these difficulties by transferring the definition of valuable life from agreement with nature to ‘rational choice and adoption of what is according to nature’.¹⁵⁴ Now we have a motive and rationale for all kinds of choices – making correct choices is what the exercise of virtue consists of. This also solves the problem of things that aren’t virtue, like self-preservation, being according to nature. Lots of things can be according to nature and yet not have value because what has value is the choosing of these natural things, not the things themselves. This gives rise to a new problem however: we must believe that the right choices are made to attain what is according to nature, but those things which are according to nature are not good. What is good is the act of selecting correctly, but the criteria for selection doesn’t allow for variations in value – the choiceworthy and not-choiceworthy are equally lacking in goodness.

Here is the problem facing the Stoics: they need to explain why we should choose things that are according to nature and avoid those which are not, and they must do this without invoking goodness, which can only be attributed to the selection *process*, which is virtue. The proposed solution is that the externals, while all indifferent in themselves, may be classified into things to be preferred by the virtuous person, and things to be declined. Preferential things are not good, but the choosing of them *is*, and thus we have motive for making correct choices while at the same time preserving goodness for virtue alone. However, this distinction is far from satisfactory, as Zeller points out. To call a group of things ‘preferred’ heavily implies that they are more valuable than things which are to be declined, and undermines the idea that nothing other than virtue is good.¹⁵⁵

The exact status of preferential externals needs to be made clearer. In one reading, they might be held to possess some real value of their own, and Zeller is happy to provide examples from Seneca, Diogenes and Chrysippus that heavily suggest that some externals (health, wealth, freedom from pain) are desirable or can be treated as real

¹⁵² Zeller, E. (1870) pp. 261

¹⁵³ pp. 262

¹⁵⁴ pp. 263

¹⁵⁵ pp. 267

goods.¹⁵⁶ This threatens to collapse the distinction between the real good, which is virtue, and the merely preferred. Alternatively, we can stick firmly to the Stoic axiom that only virtue is good, and say these things have no value whatsoever. In this case, however, what grounds can there be for preferring them? It would make as much sense to say that goodness consists in choosing blue things over yellow and providing no reason for the superiority of blueness.

If the selection of things which are according to nature is not a completely arbitrary exercise, there *must* be a difference in value. That difference can reside in one of two places: either in the things chosen, which would mean the Stoics are wrong in their placement of value, or *in the act of choosing*. If it is the latter, we might still make a case for virtue, but we still have to answer this question: why is choosing one worthless thing morally better than choosing another worthless thing?

In his Discourses and Enchiridion, Epictetus appears to provide some clues as to where the value of virtue might lie.

But if virtue holds this promise - to secure happiness, impassivity and a good flow of life - then progress towards virtue must involve progress toward these states as well.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, you have inner strengths that enable you that enable you to bear up with difficulties of every kind. You have been given fortitude, courage and patience. Why should I worry about what happens if I am armed with the virtue of fortitude? Nothing can trouble or upset me, or even seem annoying.¹⁵⁸

For every challenge, remember the resources you have within you to cope with it. Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you will grow to

¹⁵⁶ Zeller, E. (1870) pp. 268

¹⁵⁷ Epict. I.4.3

¹⁵⁸ Epict. I.6.28

be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate.¹⁵⁹

These passages suggest that, much as in Epicurus' view, virtue is *useful*. It enables us to stand up to life's challenges and yet be free from trouble and anguish. That sounds all very reasonable, but under the Stoic view it is entirely beside the point. If virtue is good in itself, and nothing else is good, then virtue can't be instrumentally valuable because there is nothing else good for virtue to lead *to*. Epictetus is eager to point out the ways in which virtue leads toward a life untroubled by passions, but why does he need to 'sell' the virtues in this way? It could of course be to entice non-Stoics, who covet an untroubled life, towards his philosophy (a true Stoic needs no enticement but virtue). However, could it also be that, without the benefits that the virtues bring about, the promise of virtue for virtue's sake looks a little meagre? We see something of a similar vein in this letter from Seneca:

Let us too overcome all things, with our reward consisting not in any wreath or garland, not in trumpet-calls for silence for the ceremonial proclamation of our name, but in moral worth, in strength of spirit, in peace that is won for ever once in any contest fortune has been utterly defeated.¹⁶⁰

Why is 'peace' placed here alongside moral worth? If virtue is valuable in itself, why mention anything else? Looking from the other direction, however, there is no end to the instances where Epictetus, Seneca and the other Stoics point out that the virtues lead to peace of mind. If there is a relationship between peace of mind and virtue, everything points to virtue being the instrument and peace being the reward. So, it seems that even the Stoics cannot find any way to express the value of virtue except by pointing to its consequences for the virtuous agent – specifically, the state of mind to which it gives rise.

10.3

¹⁵⁹ Epict. Ench. 10

¹⁶⁰ Sen. Ep. LXXVIII.16

Virtue in Epicureanism

If virtue's value is instrumental only, does that mean we should give up our intuitions about the importance of good and fine action? I don't think so. Virtue clearly plays a huge and vital part in Epicurus' philosophy – on further study we may find that this is enough to satisfy our intuition that the virtuous life is something we should value highly, and at the same time provide an instrumental, hedonistic explanation as to why this is so. Let's return to that passage from the *Menoceus*:

The starting point of this whole scheme and the most important of its values is good judgement, which consequently is more highly esteemed even than philosophy. All the other virtues stem from sound judgement, which shows that it is impossible to live the pleasant Epicurean life without living sensibly, nobly, and justly and, vice versa, that is impossible to live sensibly, nobly, and justly without living pleasantly. The traditional virtues grow up together with the pleasant life; they are indivisible.¹⁶¹

Special attention should be paid to the fact that two logical conditions are present here: Epicurus doesn't just say that living sensibly, nobly and justly is necessary for the pleasant life – it is also sufficient. Living virtuously is more than an essential tool for attaining pleasure; such a life *guarantees* pleasure. If this is true, a would-be sage might as well *aim* for the virtuous life, and pleasure will naturally result, which is not at all dissimilar from the Stoic and Aristotelian accounts.

Let us examine the Epicurean evaluations of the various virtues and see if they are enough to justify the esteem we want to hold the virtues in. We should begin with the virtue that Epicurus puts highest of all: prudence, or practical wisdom. This is the virtue of evaluating possible courses of action and choosing that which provides the greatest freedom from suffering, something like a character-based version of Bentham's calculus.

This virtue is one of the key features that sets Epicureanism apart from 'wilder' hedonists – long-term practicality is more important than instant gratification. The prudent Epicurean knows that a hard night of drinking will provide pleasure, but the resulting hangover might make that decision an unwise one. This suggests that prudence is

¹⁶¹ Epic. Ep. Men. 132

something purely instrumental – what matters is the end result, not the principle of choosing. However, this passage from the Letter to Menoeceus suggests a slightly different emphasis.

He (the Epicurean) thinks it preferable to have bad luck rationally than good luck irrationally. In other words, in human action it is better for a rational choice to be unsuccessful than for an irrational choice to succeed through the agency of chance.¹⁶²

Rational, or prudent, choice is placed higher than success. This seems odd if only the end result is of any importance. How are we to interpret this? To say that the virtue of prudence is so important that it eclipses the fact that we have failed to achieve *ataraxia* and that we are experiencing suffering goes contrary to everything else that Epicurus teaches. The only way we can approach this passage with any consistency is to assume that the true goal is long-term freedom from pain, and that prudence will be the key to achieving this.

Let us compare two scenarios, one involving bad luck and prudence, the other good luck and imprudence, and see if there is a hedonistic reason for choosing the former over the latter. Imagine that Epicurus and Aristippus the Cyrenaic have both gone out for walks with a moderate supply of food. Epicurus, of course, eats sparingly, and is content to know that he will not want for food in the future. Aristippus almost immediately devours everything he has in one delicious feast. An hour later, Epicurus slips and falls into a ravine, losing his belongings on the way. He is trapped at the bottom for a day, starving and in pain. Aristippus, meanwhile has bumped into a friend of his quite by chance and is now happily helping himself to that friend's ample provisions. Epicurus clearly showed the most prudence yet was less successful. Is it reasonable to prefer to be Epicurus to Aristippus? I think it is, for two reasons:

Admittedly, Aristippus ended up with greater pleasure *in this instance* but, as noted earlier, Epicurus correlates virtue with the pleasant *life*. Epicurus' method of prudent living is almost certain to result in less situations of pain and suffering than Aristippus' thoughtless existence. It may be possible to point out instances where Epicurus suffers and Aristippus does not, but the prudent life must provide pleasure more reliably than the imprudent. Prudence is the virtue of acting sensibly in the way that achieves the best result, so if Epicurus' life is not filled with more pleasure and less pain than Aristippus', then prudence

¹⁶² Epic. Ep. Men. 135

is not only worthless: it doesn't have any meaning at all.

In addition, Epicurean prudence is not just useful for avoiding bad luck, but also removes its sting when it does occur. In the ravine, Epicurus does not worry or fear – it will not matter if he dies, and physical pain is either bearable or temporary. These rational observations make misfortune toothless, and this is the real value of prudence. If one is unlikely to experience pain, and is able to easily endure it, then that is vastly superior to relying on Aristippus' chance encounter.

This is surely the only way in which this passage can be understood. It promotes the highest virtue, which is prudence, but does not allow pleasure to drop in importance below the level of supreme good. If this model can be equally applied to the other virtues, there emerges a theory of virtue very different to the Stoic, but that is more than just a series of tips and strategies for attaining the most pleasure. Prudence really is inseparable from the pleasant life, to the point where we can sensibly (and without deviating from hedonism for one moment) promote the pursuit of virtue over reliance on happy chance.

10.4

Useless Virtue

If we are to argue that virtue has instrumental value only, then we must accept the conclusion that a trait that provides no pleasure has no value – and that it is not really deserving of the term 'virtue.' If we find this too counter-intuitive, then we remain wedded to a view of virtue as valuable for its own sake. Let us strip a virtuous act of its pleasurable outcome and see if it retains its value.

We can imagine that Mimi has five pounds. She gives the money to a hungry and homeless person. This is a classic example of kind and generous behaviour. It seems to be a valuable act. A hedonist would have no problem deconstructing the act to demonstrate why the value of it lies in Mimi's own pleasure: she feels good about what she has done. Possibly other people see her do it and think better of her, and will thus be better disposed towards her in the future. Overall, she has bought something more valuable than the five pounds and is hedonically better off.

Now let us remove those benefits. Without her money for bus fare, Mimi has to walk home in the rain. She is not happy about what she has done, but did it because it was the right thing to do. She knows that anyone who saw her thought she was being patronising and pious and will be less well disposed towards her in the future. Mimi would have enjoyed much more pleasure had she kept her money.

Where is the intrinsic worth of the act? It does not seem obvious that there is any. The benefit to the recipient of the money might be considerable, but can't help us if we are looking for intrinsic value in the virtuous act itself. That would be an extrinsic benefit, and a hedonic one at that. We're looking for some kind of Kantian imperative: she had to do the right thing. But why? There must be some motive for her action and, if we are to say her action was good, we want a better reason than 'because she thought she was supposed to.' I would imagine that the Epicurean response would simply be: if she knew she was going to get no pleasure or security of pleasure out of it, she shouldn't have done it.

Epicurus' philosophy is profoundly practical. Every piece of philosophical advice is based on an observation of the way the world is and how it operates. The virtues seem to occupy a place somewhat akin to the rules of Mill's Utilitarianism: not to be followed for their own sake but for the *likely* outcome of following them. We can justify acts of charity because they will probably make you feel good and may go some way towards securing happiness amongst your fellow human beings. A course of action that guarantees misery is very difficult to justify, even if we take virtue to have value, because the value of virtue appears to stem from the benefits (even if they are only *likely* benefits, which might not occur in this instance).

It just so happens that leading a virtuous life tends to provide hedonic benefits. Prudence does this for obvious reasons, but other virtues function equally well. Kindness and generosity inspire friendship and good-feeling among others, essential resources for someone who wants to secure happiness. Courage and moderation help one to overcome distressing fear and the pains of indulgence. It's clear that the virtues are instrumental to pleasure, but that doesn't entirely dispel our reluctance to strip them of all intrinsic value. Of course, we could overcome that reluctance and embrace a revisionist view of virtue as nothing but disposable pleasure-increasing strategies, but that would be at odds with the emphasis Epicurus puts on their importance.

The most fitting solution would be show that virtue is *never* useless, because it always leads to pleasure. In that case, virtue should be constantly pursued and highly prized just as it would be under an intrinsic-value model, and its pleasure-increasing instrumental use would explain its worth rather than cheapen it. Our earlier analysis of the inseparability of virtue and pleasure provides this solution: living virtuously provides a pleasant *life*, even if it can't guarantee constant pleasant feeling or prevent every single instance of pain. There are no cases of useless virtue because acting virtuously, in those cases where it does not increase pleasure, further habituates one in virtue, thus making future pleasure more likely.

Among the other classical philosophers, acting virtuously might be considered dangerous: particular for those heroes who embody courage by risking their lives. The case is much the opposite for Epicureans: activities likely to incur pain or discomfort are strongly discouraged, unless of course those activities will result in greater freedom from pain in the long term. As for death itself, an Epicurean who takes care of their body and possesses reliable friends to care for them will be less at risk than most others. Death cannot be avoided by prudent living, of course, but to an Epicurean this does not matter. Unlike pain, death is the complete absence of sensation and is thus not at all unpleasant. Unfortunately, this guaranteed absence of pain cannot be enjoyed, as the subject has themselves ceased to exist. Death is therefore neither bad nor good, simply the point at which pleasure and pain cease altogether.

I have set out an interpretation of Epicureanism that is internally consistent and explains the importance we attach to virtuous living without deviating at all from hedonistic principles. What remains is to demonstrate that Epicurus' negative account of pleasure as consisting essentially in the absence or removal of pain is preferable to theories which allow pleasure to surpass that limit.

Part 3;

The limits of pleasure

11

How pleasure works

Epicurus' account of pleasure centres on contentment and the absence of pain. The maximum amount of pleasure is the complete absence of dissatisfaction and discomfort. In the last section, I tried to spell out the implications of this claims. Now I want to show that it is true, or at least not obviously false.

The practical implications of Epicurus' theory of pleasure are considerable. If we can achieve the greatest possible pleasure simply by removing all pain, then the best strategy for living the good life must be what I have called a 'perfectionist' one: minimising our desires and thus removing opportunities for disappointment and pain. The alternative strategy – that of cultivating endless new desires – is senseless; even if we could satisfy all those desires, which is unlikely, we would merely be bringing ourselves back up to the point we would be at if we didn't have those desires to start with. Ancient ethics in general counsels the limitation, if not the complete extinction, of desire for external, contingent things. Epictetus' remarks are representative:

You will never have to experience defeat if you avoid contests whose outcome is outside your control. Don't let outward appearances mislead you into thinking that someone with more prestige, power or some other distinction must on that account be happy. If the essence of the good lies within us, then there is no place for jealousy or envy, and you will not care about being a general, a senator or a consul – only about being free. And the way to be free is to look down on externals.¹⁶³

The Stoic account (and, of course, the Epicurean) places the control of desire at the centre of happiness. Not desiring externals or indifferents prevents disappointment and

¹⁶³ Epict. Ench. 19

discontentment. This creates freedom and independence from the whims of others and the vicissitudes of fate. Satisfaction is guaranteed, and therefore so is happiness. This is markedly different from the dominant modern view, which sees possibilities for happiness as being infinitely expandable, and looks with favour on the cultivation of new and exotic desires.

Thus, we have two competing theories. The Epicurean view is that complete contentment, the absence of all mental and physical pain, is the upper limit of pleasure. Since most pain is caused by unsatisfied desires, the fewer desires one has, the greater one's contentment and therefore pleasure. We also have the view dominant in modern hedonistic philosophies, including most varieties of utilitarianism: the absence of pain is not the limit of pleasure, which increases positively beyond this point. Since satisfying desires generally provides pleasure, then so long as desires are satisfied, the more desires one has, the greater one's pleasure will be. Which view is correct?

At first glance, the idea that pleasure is simply absence or removal of pain looks strikingly counter-intuitive. Some pleasures might be plausibly described in this way – think of the relief of scratching an itch, or removing pinching shoes – but most pleasures have no obvious relation to pre-existing pains. However, I think Epicurus' claim that pleasure is essentially negative can be interpreted in such a way as to make it more plausible. This requires us to look a bit closer at the way in which pleasures reduce pain.

11.1

How does kinetic pleasure reduce pain?

According to Epicurus, everyone's capacity for pleasure is capped at the complete absence of pain: no-one can experience a quantity of pleasure greater than this. But we have also seen that Epicurus considered 'profligate', positive, pleasures to *be* pleasant. How can these two claims both be true? Here is the interpretation of Epicurus that I wish to vindicate: kinetic pleasures increase our sum of pleasure only as long as we are not fully content. Once we are fully content, those pleasures, while still pleasurable, vary but do not increase pleasure or wellbeing. This is because kinetic pleasures gain their value from their ability to reduce our sum of pain.

In what manner does kinetic pleasure reduce pain? Remember that, for Epicurus, pain is fundamental; pleasure is defined in relation to pain. Katastemic pleasure consists in

the sensation of the *absence* of pain. Kinetic pleasure consists in the sensation of the *removal* of pain. If you like, we can say that kinetic pleasure is *remedial*. In a perfect world, there would be no place for it: its value lies in the removal of what is bad.

11.2 Specific and Non-Specific Remedial Pleasure

Now let me draw a distinction, which is not found in the surviving Epicurean texts themselves, but which is consistent with them. If a kinetic pleasure works by eliminating a specific source of a pain (as eating removes hunger), then it is what I will term *specifically remedial*. We say: my life is not perfect and complete because I am hungry. If I were to eat and remove that hunger, then my life would be perfect and complete. Alternatively, a kinetic pleasure might distract me from my hunger and so make me feel better; think of a good walk, or a good conversation. This is an example of a *non-specific remedial* pleasure. The kinetic pleasure is still defined negatively, as the removal of pain, but it is not linked to a specific type of pain.

Specific and non-specific forms of remedial pleasure have different implications when it comes to determining the limits of pleasure. Specific remedial pleasure has an obvious and built-in limit: it can only be increased as long as a corresponding pain exists. Once *that* pain has been eliminated, the activity ceases to give pleasure. It's like a child's toy where every plastic shape has been placed in the correct-shaped slot: throwing down a bag of more shapes won't do the child any good as every slot is already full. Smoking is a perfect example of a specific remedial pleasure: the desire for nicotine is an unpleasant want and smoking is pleasant for the smoker because it satisfies that want. Someone who does not already crave nicotine will find no pleasure in smoking; a person's very first cigarette is usually an unpleasant, or at any rate not a pleasant, experience.

But is that really how all pleasure works? Epicurus is very clear that kinetic pleasure is the removal of pain, but what does it mean to say that something removes pain? Does a massage actually *reduce* the pain of an injury, or just help distract us from it? Does it come to the same thing? We are working with a subjective definition of pleasure, and hence pain, so the question is: does the pain of the injury *feel* less bad while we enjoy the massage? Does it intrude less into our consciousness, and is its ability to make us *feel bad* impaired? I think it is obvious that it is. That being so, we needn't have specific pains in mind when we talk of kinetic pleasures removing pains. Every kinetic pleasure removes *some* pain, as long as there is pain to remove. Epicurus' own experience, recounted in his *letter to Idomeneus*, bears out this interpretation:

I have written this letter to you on a happy day to me, which is also the last day of my life. For I have been attacked by a painful inability to urinate, and also dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which comes from the recollection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions. And I beg you to take care of the children of Metrodorus, in a manner worthy of the devotion shown by the young man to me, and to philosophy.¹⁶⁴

Epicurus' physical pain is not *removed* by means of his recollections, but the kinetic pleasure they provide lessens the impact of the pain to such an extent that Epicurus's overall state is a pleasant and happy one. Of course, as long as the physical pain exists, complete contentment is out of Epicurus' reach. Other enjoyments will increase his level of pleasure through a kind of distraction: the underlying problem remains, but its ability to disrupt happiness is reduced. An implication of this is that removing the source of a pain, be it a physical discomfort or an unnecessary desire, is the best way to gain perfect happiness, but that other kinds of pleasure can move us closer to this goal, by distracting us from the things that cause us pain.

11.3

A positive role for kinetic pleasure

This understanding of how pleasures reduce pain leads us to a conclusion that seems at first sight not to chime particularly well with Epicurean philosophy: for most people, in most situations, a variety of kinetic pleasures may make them better off. It could even be in their best interests to pursue what Epicurus termed 'profligate' pleasures, since they will reduce overall pain through the mechanism of distraction.

A brief examination, however, show that this actually chimes with Epicurus' own words. 'Every pleasure is a good by reason of its having a nature akin to our own, but not every pleasure is desirable.'¹⁶⁵ Epicurus is a true hedonist, and as such considers all pleasure to be valuable in themselves: rejecting the pleasures that result from

¹⁶⁴ D. L. 22

¹⁶⁵ Epic. Ep. Men. 129

unnecessary and unnatural desires is a matter of strategy, not of principle: 'In addition, we consider limitation of the appetites a major good, and we recommend this practice not for the purpose of enjoying just a few things and no more, but rather for the purpose of enjoying those few in case we do not have much.'¹⁶⁶ In other words, if the world were otherwise, and we could guarantee that we obtain the object of every desire, then there would be no harm in pursuing all manner of pleasures. Unfortunately, that's not the way the world works. It often transpires that we don't get exactly what we want, and sometimes we get very little at all. This being so, the more desires we have, the greater our lack and thus the greater our pain. When we factor in Epicurus' claim that mental pains are greater and longer-lasting, and that the person with more desires also experiences greater fear and worry about the *possibility* of dissatisfaction, we can see that there is solid ground for the claim that, from a purely hedonistic standpoint, desires are a danger and a liability.

The more pains or unfulfilled desires we have, the more 'room' we have to keep benefiting from kinetic pleasures. However, we must remember that the greater our dissatisfaction, the worse off and unhappier we will be. A more conventional kind of hedonist, who has an endless appetite for pleasures, may be *correct* in their belief that these pleasures will make them better off. However, they will always be worse off than the Epicurean sage, because their incessant boosts of pleasure only improve their circumstances *given* that their desires create an ever-emptying void of want and absence. Even an Epicurean who is suffering will very nearly always be better off, because their level of dissatisfaction will be low, and because they have ready access to numerous sources of kinetic pleasure that will take them close, if not all the way, to the point of complete contentment.

12

Static pleasure

Before we can determine if this is a true account of how pleasure works, we need to resolve one more point of contention: the idea of static pleasure. I have said that there is something counter-intuitive about the idea that freedom from pain is the upper limit of pleasure. However, the counter-intuitiveness is removed when we consider that this limit is very difficult to reach and that there is, in most cases, still suffering to remove. But this may in turn make Epicureanism seem an impossibly demanding philosophy. If *ataraxia* is out of

¹⁶⁶ Epic. Ep. Men. 130

reach for most of us, what is the point of striving for it?

I don't think that the difficulty of attaining complete contentment makes contentment a foolish goal to aim at. Complete contentment may well be very hard for the desire-burdened hedonist to attain, but the whole purpose of Epicurean philosophy is to train a person so that contentment comes much more easily. Sensible and healthy living makes physical distress less likely, and practical wisdom and an accurate understanding of the world dispels worries and fears. Even if we are beset by pains we cannot remove or overcome, living and thinking like an Epicurean gets us so much closer to *aponia* and *ataraxia* that our wellbeing is drastically improved even if the final end of absolute freedom of discomfort is never reached.

It is also very important to differentiate the ultimate and elusive state of perfect *aponia* and *ataraxia* from the general category of static pleasures. Someone who is suffering in some way, and therefore is able to benefit from kinetic pleasures, may also be experiencing static pleasures in other areas. If we return to our earlier example, we might be experiencing hunger while all other needs are met. We would be below the threshold of complete absence of pain, so kinetic pleasures like a pleasant memory or conversation with a friend can increase our level of pleasure and make us better off. It would be false to say that we are enjoying complete *aponia*, but there are still many static pleasures, both physical and mental, that we are enjoying: we are sitting comfortably and are well rested, we have no fears for the future because we know we will not have to be hungry for long, and so on. Every aspect of life other than our need for food is complete, so we are enjoying great static pleasure, including the lofty prize of *ataraxia*. This is entirely consistent with the observation that there is something that could make us even happier.

The claim that there is an upper limit to pleasure is starting to look much more consistent with our everyday observations and intuitions. Now we have to determine the truth of the claim. In order to do this, we must imagine that we have reached what Epicurus claimed is the upper limit of pleasure: the complete absence of pain and suffering. We are enjoying every static pleasure there is: every need we have is satisfied and we are confident that they will remain so in the future. Now suppose we experience something that is usually a source of kinetic pleasure, an active joy of some kind: a piece of chocolate or a warm hug from a loved one. If this makes us have *more* pleasure than we had before, then one of the central tenets of Epicureanism is false, and the whole philosophy looks untenable. If, however, it turns out to be true that pleasure cannot increase past this point, then Epicurus is correct to say that the limit of pleasure is the

absence of pain, and the rest of his philosophy of life falls nicely into place.

The answer is difficult to intuit. We often say things like 'life can't get any better' or 'I'm as happy as could be', but then it is also difficult to understand why something that would normally make us happier would suddenly lose that power when we are completely content. To find the answer, we have to look at the actual mechanics of how kinetic pleasures work to increase our sum of pleasure.

One of the most basic sources of pleasure is the fulfilling of desire: getting what we want feels good. According to Epicurus, this is because desires are a kind of absence – to want is the same as to be in want. That want is a hole in our peace of mind and body. Whether it is the physical hankering for food or the lust for reputation and fame, desire is pain and satisfaction is the pleasurable removal of that pain. For someone who is completely content, who is experiencing no wants, this source of pleasure is unavailable. However, in Chapter One, we rejected desire-satisfaction as a theory of wellbeing. We concluded that satisfying desire is not good in itself but useful because satisfying desire is a reliable, but not the only, means of acquiring pleasurable feeling. It was also established that pleasurable sensations can exist *without* the satisfaction of any desire, and indeed it makes sense that some future desires are born out of the need to replicate previous sensational pleasures. Therefore, while a fully contented person cannot gain greater pleasure from the satisfaction of desires, it remains possible that they might do so from pleasures that are not desired.

This seems, certainly, to be the ideal way in which the Epicurean encounters pleasure *before* the threshold of painlessness is reached. The Epicurean does not desire fine foods or sex because they are not necessary and the desire itself would always be either an actual or potential source of suffering. However, as long as it involves no pain or sacrifice, the Epicurean can enjoy these things as and when they become available: they do, after all, provide pleasure in a 'non-specific' way, by distracting us from other sources of pain.

So, what happens when the fully contented person experiences an undesired pleasant sensation? If this results in an increase in pleasure in even one instance, we should wash our hands of Epicurean theory because one of its central tenets is shown to be false: kinetic pleasures *can* work in a positive, non-remedial fashion. It is worth revisiting Epicurus' words on the subject to see why he thought this was impossible.

The quantitative limit of pleasure is the elimination of all feelings of pain. Wherever the pleasurable state exists, there is neither bodily pain nor mental

pain nor both together, so long as the state continues.¹⁶⁷

Bodily pleasure is not enlarged once the pains brought on by need have been done away with; it is only diversified. And the limit of mental pleasure is established by rational reflection on pleasures themselves and those kindred emotions that once instilled extreme fear in human minds.¹⁶⁸

These two passages refer to the pure *katastemic* state in which one possesses both *aponia* and *ataraxia*. Beyond this point, pleasure cannot be increased. But note that the state of perfect pleasure is by no means always the same – it can be varied and diversified in many ways. Epicurus therefore does not seem to be imagining one unique pleasant state or situation, but rather any one of numerous situations and activities in which there is no distress. The picture he is drawing is of state in which we continue to perform numerous actions – eating, talking, playing games etc. – all of which are pleasurable, but which do not increase our pleasure beyond the point of perfect freedom from pain. This passage again refers to the painless state, but more specifically references the remedial quality of kinetic pleasure: we do not need it if pain is absent.

We have already encountered a category of pleasures that exist in the absence of pain and cannot increase beyond a certain point: *katastemic* pleasures. A way of putting Epicurus' point, then, is this the pleasurable experiences that we enjoy in the absence of pain are no longer kinetic, but *katastemic* pleasures, which do not increase our pleasure but diversify it.

This interpretation of Epicurus implies that the difference between kinetic and *katastemic* pleasures lies not in the pleasures themselves but in the condition of the subject. The person in pain is like a car that will not start because it is out of fuel. Putting fuel in the tank will be restorative, allowing the car to function properly. Once the car is functioning, adding more fuel will not increase the performance of the car (at this point in time) and thus won't function in a restorative manner even though it is qualitatively identical to the previous addition of fuel.

The alternative view, that kinetic and *katastemic* pleasures are categorially distinct

¹⁶⁷ Epic. L.D. 3

¹⁶⁸ 18

from one another, is problematic, both as a working theory and as an interpretation of Epicurus. Gosling and Taylor argue that separating the pleasures in this way runs at odds with Epicurus' account of the highest good, as recounted by Cicero.

For my part I cannot understand what that good is if one subtracts those pleasures perceived by taste, those from hearing and music, and those sweet movements, too, got from visual perception of shapes, or any of the other pleasures generated by any sense in the whole man. Nor can one hold that joy of mind is alone among the goods. For as I understand it the mind is in a state of joy when it has hope of all those things I have mentioned above, that nature may acquire them with complete absence of pain.¹⁶⁹

This passage of Cicero gives us an insight into the Epicurean understanding of pleasure. Gosling and Taylor think it shows clearly that all pleasures either are sensory in nature or depend on the anticipation or memory of sensory pleasures.¹⁷⁰ If nothing remains of the good once sensory pleasures are removed, and the good is katastemic pleasure, then katastemic pleasures must be sensory or sensory dependent.

Aponia is experiencing sensory pleasure and no sensory pain. *Ataraxia* is the mental confidence that we can acquire *aponia*. As Gosling and Taylor comment:

This confidence is itself a positive state. However unadulterated by pain one's sensory pleasures may be, one's pleasure is all too likely to be spoiled by various misapprehensions. These will be false beliefs about death, about the gods, about fancy diet, about the limits of bodily pleasure, about the desirability of long life and so on. These erroneous beliefs disturb the mind and their removal is required for *ataraxia*.¹⁷¹

It is difficult to see how this interpretation of Epicurus could not be the correct one: Epicurus' insistence that katastemic pleasure is sensory means that katastemic and kinetic pleasures differ not in kind but in how they affect our current state. Pleasures are kinetic insofar as they are remedial, specifically or non-specifically: they help to alleviate our pain. Beyond this point, they become katastemic pleasures – enjoyed in the absence of pain.

¹⁶⁹ Cic. Tusc. III xviii.41–2

¹⁷⁰ Gosling, J.C.B. and Taylor, C.C.B. (1982) 19.0.6.

¹⁷¹ 19.1.2.

Katastemic pleasure is not some higher state that is entirely unlike the everyday pleasures of food and sex. Rather, katastemic pleasures are those same pleasures untempered by pain. If we enjoy pleasures when we are without discomfort or hunger we have *aponia*, and when we enjoy pleasures without apprehension or concern we have *ataraxia*.

This completes our interpretation of Epicurus on pleasure. It remains to show that he is correct. Is the absence of pain really the limit of pleasure, or can pleasure go on increasing without end?

13

Absence of pain as the limit of pleasure

I think that Epicurus is right to say that the absence of pain is the upper limit of pleasure. I do not think that it just so happens that pleasure does not increase past this point; rather, it would be impossible for it to do so. I have suggested that the apparent oddity of this idea stems from a failure of imagination. If we try to conceive of what a state of perfectly painlessness would really be like, we will find it easier to make sense of the claim that pleasure cannot be increased beyond this point.

We have already discussed the negative effects of unsatisfied desire. Wanting something and not having it is a source of pain, just as being in physical need is a source of pain. Want disrupts and dilutes pleasure and makes us feel worse, whether that want is mental or physical in nature. Earlier, we rejected Heathwood's desire-satisfaction theory of pleasure and pain. I am not claiming that all pains stem from frustrated wants, only that all wants are painful. If one were to pierce one's hand on a nail, it would be odd to attribute one's pain to the unsatisfied need for an unpierced hand rather than to the painful sensation. Similarly, the physical desire for food and the unrequited desire for fame are both unpleasant because they cause painful sensations. Although mental and physical pains may feel very different (although not always: loss and sadness can uncannily replicate a kick in the stomach) they can both accurately be called unpleasant experience.

The Epicurean claim is this: once all pain is gone, pleasure cannot be increased. I will try to imagine myself in this position. Obviously, any painful physical sensation would disqualify me, so I must imagine that I have avoided the nail and I do not have a

headache. Additionally, I must not have any physical needs or wants, because these cause distress. If I am hot or cold, uncomfortable or tired, itchy or hungry, then I cannot say that I am without distress. Instead, I would stand in need of pleasure, consisting either in the removal of the problem or in something to distract me from it. The same is true of mental pains. If I am afraid, guilty, sad, jealous or angry then I could be having a more pleasant time. So, let us say that I am sitting comfortably, and that my mind is not stressed. Everything is fine. I am experiencing no pain and am therefore at the Epicurean limit of pleasure. Nothing could make my life more pleasant. But this seems ludicrous: I could be having an amazing time experiencing all kinds of pleasures and that would be vastly superior to this painless state. Epicurus must be wrong.

I think this would be an incorrect conclusion to draw. Having no obvious pains is necessary for *aponia* and *ataraxia*, but not sufficient. Being 'fine' is not the same as being entirely without distress. In order truthfully to say that I am content, there must be *nothing at all about my situation that I would want to change*. This may at first seem drastically different to not being in pain, but I will demonstrate that they are one and the same.

Returning to me, I am without any obvious pains or distresses. However, I still have a number of unsatisfied desires. I am not uncomfortable, but it would be nice to sit outside and feel the sunlight on my face. This hardly causes me anguish, but it is a source of very mild dissatisfaction that I am stuck inside. I think it is accurate to say that my sensational pleasure – how good I *feel* – has been decreased by this unsatisfied desire. It would be incorrect to say that I am entirely without distress and therefore incorrect that I can experience no further pleasure. Epicurus would surely argue that my desire for solar warmth, however insubstantial, is keeping me from both *ataraxia* (because I feel I am missing out) and *aponia* (because my body yearns for that sensation). Therefore, I can continue to experience additional remedial pleasure, of both a specific and non-specific kind.

This should give us some indication of how high the bar of painlessness really is. If a mild desire to sit outside is enough to rob me of *aponia* and *ataraxia*, then I have to admit that I have hundreds of such discontents. Each is fairly insignificant in and of itself, but added together they create a huge deficit of pleasure. Imagine how much better I would be feeling if I didn't have a faint wish to be more respected at work, a nagging anxiety about the guttering on my roof, the guilty reminder that I missed my brother's birthday. Without trying to sound melodramatic, even someone we would normally consider to be without pain is in fact suffering constantly, sometimes physically but more often mentally.

Earlier, we rejected desire-satisfactionism and attitudinal hedonism in favour of sensational hedonism. This means that we aren't concerned with desires (ideal or actual), preferences or attitudes *in themselves*, but only so far as they lead to pleasure or pain. Does every desire that things be otherwise entail pain? I think so, and to show how, we have to picture life with and without that desire.

In one case, I am inside, desiring to be outside. I am by no means unhappy, but it is fair to say that my pleasure is not perfect. There are two ways in which this unsatisfied desire can be removed: by satisfying it or by eliminating the desire. Let us say I go outside. I enjoy the warmth of the sun and my dissatisfaction about missing out disappears. Clearly, in this situation I have increased my pleasure. Alternatively, like a good Epicurean, I can think about my desire and dispel it. I remember that although sunlight is nice, it will make me thirsty or make me long for the shade of inside, or simply that there's nothing wrong with where I am and I don't need anything else. My desire fades. Am I enjoying more pleasure now that I don't want to go outside? Surely, I am because I can better enjoy where I am without feeling sorry for myself for not being outside. Similarly, now that I don't yearn for the warmth, I am actually enjoying the shady coolness of the room.

Perhaps the word 'pain' is misleadingly strong, but it must be admitted that wanting-things-to-be-otherwise is a source of dissatisfaction or discontent, which is antithetical to pleasure. The ordinary person lives a life full of desires that can't all be satisfied at once. Some, like the all-too-common wish that we had acted differently in the past, are impossible to satisfy. Therefore, the painless conditions of *aponia* and *ataraxia* are not a 'normal' state of affairs that can easily be improved upon but are in fact extraordinary states of pleasure-perfection that can be reached only very rarely unless we change our way of thinking and desiring.

13.1

Beyond the limit

This is all very well, but the question we have been trying to answer is this: what happens beyond that point of perfect contentment? However difficult it is to achieve, how can it be proved that this is the ultimate limit and that a pleasurable sensation, unconnected to the satisfaction of desire, won't make it better?

An obvious counter-example to Epicurus' thesis would be the case of someone entirely content, with no mental or physical distress of any kind, experiencing more

pleasure from something unexpected, that satisfied no previous need, like a tiny, delicate, sugary cupcake. This cake is clearly pleasurable and doesn't remove any pain because the subject was in no way distressed by the absence of such a thing before this point.

I argue that this objection fails. It does so for two reasons: it assumes a normal level of functioning and it ignores the way that katastemic pleasure works. It assumes normal functioning in that it is true that, in pretty much any everyday situation, a tiny, delicate sugary cupcake would increase pleasure for most people. However, we must imagine that this is not an ordinary situation, but a condition of absolute contentment in mind and body. Everything is perfect – all of one's dreams and hopes are fulfilled (otherwise they would be disrupting *ataraxia*) and the body, including the palette and stomach, want for absolutely nothing, not even for sensation. Secondly, the objection assumes that the cupcake must be *increasing* pleasure for one to be enjoying it. Our previous reflections on katastemic pleasure show why this is false. The cupcake could be enjoyed with the greatest possible pleasure, undiluted by pain, but without any increase of pleasure, because, before the cupcake appeared, one was enjoying something else with equally perfect pleasure. It has replaced, or varied, something just as good.

How can this be true? It seems obvious that, whatever one's situation, some pleasures are simply greater than others. If one is sitting contently with no distress, and then one is injected with a drug that causes intense euphoria, surely pleasure has been increased, not just varied. I think that this example is equally unsuccessful as an objection to Epicurus. This is because it accords too much importance to the pleasures themselves. Recall the entire situation: the person in question is absolutely content in mind and body: they do not want anything at all. To someone without want, an experience of euphoria must, by definition, be *unwanted*. That does not mean resented or avoided, just a matter of indifference – he or she is perfectly well enjoying a relaxing sit-down at the moment, thank you very much. In this context, I think it is reasonable to believe that the unwanted euphoric sensation feels very different, intense, and overwhelming and is pleasurable in the most perfect and undiluted way and yet still is no *more* pleasant than the perfect and undiluted pleasure of relaxation. If we find this hard to imagine, it is because for most people, or perhaps even all people, the constant need for more intense experience means that *ataraxia* is attained rarely or never. The adrenaline junkie does not repeatedly exceed the bounds of Epicurean tranquillity, but rather is normally found below it, denied contentment by their body's needs.

In fact, any example which purports to prove that pleasure can be increased beyond the point of contentment can be argued by an Epicurean to actually demonstrate that

contentment was yet to be reached. This might seem to make the Epicurean theory of pleasure 'unfalsifiable', and therefore (according to Popper's well-known criterion) empirically empty. One might even argue that the question whether pleasure is absence of pain, or a positive sensation in its own right, is a trivial matter of definition: a kind of 'is-the-glass-half-full-or-half-empty' sort of question. Any pleasure *can* be seen as an absence or diminution of pain – but then, by the same token, any pain can be seen as an absence or diminution of pleasure. Which way of looking at the matter we choose will come down to temperament.

I am not sure that there is any way of *proving* the Epicurean thesis that the absence of pain is the limit of pleasure. All I have tried to do in this section is to remove some of the obstacles that stand in the way of acceptance of this thesis. I have accounted for our intuition that pleasure can be positive by identifying kinetic pleasures as remedial in a non-specific way, and therefore as increasing pleasure purely by reducing the sum total of pain, rather than by eradicating specific pains. I have also suggested how all manner of pleasures can be enjoyed in the painless state without pleasure thereby increasing.

Ultimately, the best argument for thinking of pleasure as limited by the absence of pain is a practical one. Thinking of pleasure in this way will lead us to prefer a 'perfectionist' rather than a 'maximising' strategy for attaining pleasure: it will lead us to focus on controlling and possibly eliminating our desires, rather than simply striving to satisfy whatever desires we happen to have. Given all the evidence that the vast increase in wealth and consumer choice in advanced economies has not contributed anything to the sum total of human happiness, and may even have diminished it, I think it is time that we considered the Epicurean alternative.

In this paper, I have provided an interpretation of Epicureanism that is consistent with the hedonistic theory of wellbeing outlined in Part 1. I have also provided an argument, based on Epicurean insights, for taking a perfectionist approach to attaining pleasure, rather than a maximising one. I have attempted to rebut some criticisms of Epicurus' philosophy and, while I do not think that his recommendations for living can be conclusively vindicated, I believe that they provide us with the best hope for attaining the good and pleasant life.

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