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Adunamic hedonism

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Power and pleasure figure in the hedonism championed by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* and in that advocated by Epicurus. The way in which each version of hedonism involves power, however, is very different. In Callicles' view, power is absolutely essential to the good life. Epicurus, by contrast, proposes an ethical theory that I shall call 'adunamic': political and economic power are at best inessential and perhaps even detrimental to our efforts to lead a happy life. My excuse for this neologism is that both Callicles and Epicurus praise self-sufficiency. But they seem to mean something different by this and I would locate this difference in their views about the role of power in the pleasant life. We might *expect* the story to go this way: Callicles' thinks that power is essential to the pleasant life because of the way that he thinks about pleasure. Pleasure consists in the satisfaction of desires and this requires power. Epicurus, by contrast, has a different account of pleasure. On his account, the very best pleasures turn out to be the ones that require very little power to secure. Hence, Epicurus' hedonism is adunamic, while Callicles' is not. But I shall argue that this is not, in fact, the right account of power in Epicurean ethics. Epicurus actually *begins* from the belief that happiness does not require much in the way of political or economic power. This determines the shape of his theory of the good, not the other way round.

1. Callicles and power

Let us begin with Callicles.¹ Callicles argues that power is indispensable to the person who seeks a good life (*Gorgias* 483a, 486a, 492a). Socrates would, of course, question whether what Callicles means by 'power' is genuinely a good. By 'power' Callicles understands the capacity to satisfy whatever desires one might happen to have. Socrates assumes that power, properly speaking, must be a good to the person who has it (466a). Since a person may have desires the satisfaction of which do not benefit him, Callicles' notion of power is incorrect. This disagreement about the nature of power only reflects Callicles' and Socrates' deeper disagreement about the nature of the good. Callicles supposes that pleasure is the good and that pleasure consists in the process in which desires are satisfied. He accepts the analogy that Socrates offers according to which pleasure is like the filling up of an empty jar. Thus, the capacity to satisfy one's desires, whatever they might be, is a means to the good. (At least up until 499b, where he distances himself from this kind of uncritical hedonism.) This, in turn, leads on to the disagreement about the virtues. In his argument, at least, Callicles seems to regard the virtues simply as instruments to the attainment of the good.² Since the good is pleasure and pleasure results from the satisfaction of desires, those states of character which help us satisfy our desires are virtues. Thus, bravery and intelligence are genuine virtues, for one must have the courage and cunning to put in motion the plans that will realise one's desires. A concern for justice, however, can stand in the way. Thus, Socrates and Callicles disagree about

¹ For ease of exposition I will simply speak of Callicles' theory of pleasure or Callicles' attitude toward justice. I suspend judgement on the question of whether there was such a sophist who held such a theory. For a synoptic overview see Pieri, *Gorgia*, 21-3.

² It is not clear that he *really* regards them merely as instruments, since when Socrates suggests that a pleasant life enjoyed by the foolish and cowardly would be every bit as good as the triumphs of his superior person, Callicles resists (*Gorgias* 497e).

whether what is conventionally called 'justice' is really a virtue. More importantly, they disagree about the value of *sôphrosunê* or restraint. The pleasures that a person can have depend not only upon her ability to satisfy her desires, but by the number and intensity of the desires she possesses to satisfy. The person who wants big pleasures—and of course has the power to gratify them—ought to cultivate big appetites. This Callicles regards as antithetical to the virtue of restraint.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates appears to deny the identification of pleasure with the good.³ At least he denies that the satisfaction of any and every desire is good. Someone might deny this because he thinks that some desires are desires for things that are, in themselves, not good⁴ or someone might think that some desires are such that their satisfaction leads to a preponderance of pain over pleasure in the long run. The former seems to be Socrates' position in the *Gorgias*. But the latter position, familiar from Plato's *Protagoras*, is actually one that Callicles *could* occupy were he not so keen to assume the Byronesque persona—someone 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.⁵ This might require that his rejection of the value of

³ The question of the relation between the apparent endorsement of hedonism in the *Protagoras* and the position Socrates adopts in the *Gorgias* is, of course, an old chestnut. For references and a critique of the view that Socrates' hedonism in the *Protagoras* is merely *ad hominem*, see Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 85-89 as well as his *Gorgias*, 204-6 for comments specifically on that dialogic. For a more nuanced version of an essentially *ad hominem* view, see Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 106-22.

⁴ Such a view is suggested by Socrates' remarks at 499d. The good pleasures are ones that are beneficial, the evil ones those that are harmful. The examples that follow suggest that the notions of benefit and harm are not to be understood merely in terms of subsequent pleasures and pains. The claim at 500a that we should seek certain pleasures for the sake of other goods and not goods for the sake of pleasures would seem to make little sense if the only standard for goodness is long-term pleasure.

⁵ Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 192, seems to deny this. Since Callicles' version of hedonism is meant to justify his rejection of justice, no version of hedonism like that in *Protagoras* could be acceptable to him. For *Protagorean* hedonism could perhaps support the instrumental value of restraint and justice. It would depend on

restraint not be so absolute, but it might nonetheless be plausible that acquiring the virtue of justice is not a good investment for the rational pleasure seeker.

Even this sanitised, less Byronesque version of hedonism may require that a person have a substantial amount of power in order to lead a pleasant—and therefore happy—life. Even if the structure my desires is consciously modified by well informed forethought, it might still be the case that the satisfaction of my now consistent set of desires requires a good bit of political and/or economic power. Suppose I like big houses and I like killing rich people. I recognise that acting on the latter desire is likely to result in an extended stay in a very small, nasty prison cell and this is inconsistent with the satisfaction of my desire for a big house. So I do not act on this desire, or perhaps even undergo therapy to rid myself of it and replace it with one which is consistent with owning a big house. Perhaps I shall be able to transmute my specific homicidal urges into a generalised blood-lust which could be satisfied by shooting pheasants on my large estate. Still, it remains that big houses cost big money and it will require considerable economic power on my part to secure the satisfaction of this desire.

Such a version of hedonism also raises questions about the instrumental value of the traditional virtues. Perhaps intelligence (construed merely as a kind of Humean savvy for getting what I want) will still be a character trait that permits the hedonistic agent to live well. The value of courage and restraint, however, seem to be conditional. If the desires that I in fact have are ones whose satisfaction is likely to land me in a great deal of trouble, then I am perhaps better off without the courage to act on them. If pleasure is the good and it results from getting what I want and, further, it happens to be in my power to get a great deal of something I desire without any negative consequences in the future, then it would seem to be contrary to

whether the just and temperate person's life is more pleasant for him overall than the life of the unjust and dissolute person. But to see that this is a legitimate point of contention is already to see how Callicles might suppose that even this version of hedonism might call for the rejection of justice and restraint as virtues.

my interests to have the virtue of restraint. Justice is sure to be problematic as well. If what matters to my happiness is the satisfaction of my desires, whatever they might happen to be, then surely a *reputation* for justice among others will secure for me whatever advantages toward that end that an actual propensity to treat others fairly would. This, of course, is just the problem of the *Republic* and some would argue that this is precisely because in that work Plato comes to the realisation that an instrumental theory of the value of these virtues is ultimately indefensible. I don't wish to enter that debate here. Let us simply note that any hedonism that (1) regards pleasure as something we experience only in the process in which a desire is satisfied and (2) places only the constraint of consistency and perhaps realism on the desires the agent has will have a hard time accommodating our intuition that it is always better to have than to lack the cardinal virtues. It will also make power an essential external: something which though not itself pleasurable is practically necessary for the attainment of the good life.

2. Epicurus' critique of desires

Epicureanism denies both 1 and 2. Let me focus exclusively on the winnowing of desires for a moment. Epicurus distinguishes the imaginary or empty desires from those that are natural and subdivides the natural into the necessary and unnecessary (*Letter to Menoecus* 127; *Kuria doxa* 29).⁶

⁶ The exact details of the taxonomy are problematic. *Kuria doxa* 30 makes it seem as if a particular desire could be both natural but unnecessary and still pursued in a way that depends on an imaginary belief. Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 192, proposes that the division of beliefs is not solely a function of their content but also depends on the agent's attitude toward the object of the desire. So, a desire for lobster (presumably something that is typically a natural but unnecessary desire) could count as imaginary or empty if the agent wants it so much that it disturbs her *ataraxia*. According to Annas, the right way to read the division between natural and necessary as opposed to merely natural desires is in terms of a distinction between generic and specific. The former are desires for food

It is alleged that being a successful pleasure seeker requires ridding oneself of imaginary desires (*Kuria doxa* 30; *Vatican Saying* 21). In some instances, the plausibility of this claim must depend upon the specific nature of the object of desire: some things cannot be attained no matter how much power one has. Thus, the fear of death and desire to avoid it are states that we would be better off without. The kinds of behaviour in which people engage in their pursuit of this desire—or its sublimated counterparts—is pointless (cf. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 3.1045–75).⁷ In other situations, the desires are not logically self-defeating, but practically so. Thus we are told that a desire for wealth cannot be satisfied without slavery to the mob or powerful people. This slavery is incompatible with freedom and this is necessary for a pleasant life (*Vatican Saying* 67).

The specification of the content of the desires which are assigned to the categories of necessary and non-necessary desires is crucial to seeing what role power plays in Epicurean hedonism. Epicurus suggests that the natural and necessary desires can be satisfied by a very simple diet, modest accommodation and some good friends. It is assumed, probably correctly, that in most cases not a great deal of political or economic power is required to obtain these things. Thus, on the basis of his critique of the content of natural desire, Epicurus has reached the conclusion that a happy life *need not* require power. But, we may object, 'Granted that we can be happy with this spartan existence, wouldn't we be *happier* with some of the things that power can provide?'

3. The limit of pleasure is the absence of pain

As even the most modestly informed reader knows, Epicurus' answer is 'No'. I have intentionally suppressed the crucial premise about the nature of pleasure in order to see how important it is to the Epicurean rejection of

or shelter while the latter are desires for specific kinds of food like lobster or a specific art-deco shelter in an expensive bay-side suburb.

⁷ Cf. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 195–201.

political and economic power as an essential component in the good life. Unlike Callicles, Epicurus does not think that pleasure consists simply in the process in which a desire is satiated:

So when we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time, as some out of ignorance and disagreement or refusal to understand suppose we do, but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For what produces the pleasant life is not continuous drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and other dishes of an expensive table, but sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance, and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion.⁸

In this passage, the activities in which various desires are satisfied are contrasted with a state in which one has *aponia* and *ataraxia*, but both count as pleasures. *Aponia* and *ataraxia* are elsewhere described as *katastematic* pleasures.⁹ The nature and significance of the distinction between kinetic and *katastematic* pleasures within Epicureanism is a hotly debated topic. It is sufficient for the moment to observe that Epicurus seems to recognise that there are pleasures that do not consist in the process by which an antecedent lack or desire is satisfied. This is enough to show that he rejects the key element of Callicles' version of hedonism. Of course, Epicurus may not have been the only philosopher to see that Callicles' tacit theory of pleasure is inadequate. In *Philebus* 51a-52c Plato distinguishes a kind of pleasure which does not consist in the replenishment of any *perceived* lack or in the eradication of any antecedent longing.¹⁰ He calls such pleasures 'pure pleasures' since they don't involve

⁸ Letter to Menoeceus 131-2, trans. Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (hereafter LS), I. §21B.

⁹ Diogenes Laertius 10.136, 'Freedom from disturbance and the absence of pain are *katastematic* pleasures...' There are problems about how the rest of the sentence should read. See Gosling and Taylor, *Greeks on Pleasure*, 388-94 and Merlan, *Epicurus and Aristotle*, 3-7 for opposing views.

¹⁰ It might nonetheless be the case that all pleasure presupposes a move away

any admixture of pain or any antecedent conscious desire. Aristotle goes further yet in recognising that pleasure need not involve any kind of *kinêsis* at all (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.13).

But, it is important to see that simply recognising the shortcomings of Callicles' theory does not yet get you to an adunamic ethical theory. Even if the pleasures of sight or smell or learning—to take Plato's examples of the pure pleasures—do not presuppose any antecedent distress which is eliminated, it may require significant power to enjoy these pure pleasures. Granted, we shall not find ourselves in pain or distress if we fail to attain such pure pleasures. For this reason, the hedonistic corollary to avoid pain does not drive us toward them. But, nothing in the simple recognition of the existence of such pleasures dictates that our lives couldn't be made *better* by their satisfaction. This, in turn, may well require a significant amount of power. Crucial to Epicurean *adunamia* is the belief that the satisfaction of natural but non-necessary desires does nothing to *improve upon* the state in which one has one's natural and necessary desires fulfilled. So, if little power is required to satisfy these desires and if your life is not made better by the satisfaction of non-necessary natural desires, little power is required for the *best* life. The crucial teaching on the nature of pleasure is summarised in the first lines of *Kuriat doxai* 3 and 18

The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasure... As soon as the feeling of pain produced by want is removed, pleasure will not increase but is only varied. (trans. LS I.21C)¹¹

So, the best life is, in the first instance, one in which the natural and necessary desires are fulfilled. There are other essential elements in the good life. Every bit as important for happiness is the elimination of the sources of mental anxiety. In fact, it appears that this may even be more

from a natural state. Yet we may be unaware of the lack which is filled. Plato's evolution away from a simple theory of pleasure as replenishment is discussed at length in Gosling and Taylor, *Greeks on Pleasure*.

¹¹ See also Cicero *De finibus* 1.38: 'omnis autem privatione doloris putat Epicurus terminari summam voluptatem, ut postea variari voluptas distinguere possit, augeri amplificarique non possit.'

important. Epicurus is aware that there will be times in our lives when we will suffer physically, either for the sake of some future pleasure or simply because fate has dealt us kidney stones or what have you. In such instances, the understanding which frees us from mental anxiety assures us that these pains will not be both long and intense (*Kuria doxa* 4). What is crucial for my purpose is that the means to freedom from anxiety require as little in the way of political and economic power as the means to freedom from the natural and necessary desires.

So, how could anyone justify the conclusion that if we are free from pain (and of course mental anxiety) we have as pleasant a life as is possible? The answer to this question is awfully hard to glean from the surviving writings of Epicurus. The *Letter to Menoceus* is relevant but proteptic and the *Kuriai doxai* and *Vatican Sayings* have all the conclusions but not much in the way of the arguments. It is frequently thought that we get an extended argument for this conclusion in Bk 1 of Cicero's *De finibus*.

There are two things that Epicurus must establish: first, that the state in which we experience neither pain nor anxiety is properly called pleasure and second that nothing could constitute an improvement upon this state. It appears at first glance that the argument in *De finibus* 1.37-8 concentrates solely upon the first of these tasks:

We [Epicureans] do not just pursue the kind [of pleasure] which stimulates our nature itself with a certain kind of smoothness and is perceived by the senses with a sort of sweetness, but rather we hold that the greatest pleasure is that which is perceived when all pain is removed (*quae percipitur omni dolore detracto*). For since when we are freed from pain, we rejoice in this very liberation from and absence of annoyance, and since everything in which we rejoice is a pleasure (just as everything which irritates us is a pain), then it is right to call the absence of all pain (*doloris omnis privatio*) pleasure. Just as when hunger and thirst are driven out by food and drink, the very removal of annoyance brings with it the greatest pleasure, so in every case too the removal of pain brings with it a consequent pleasure. [38] So Epicurus did not think that there was some intermediate state between pleasure and pain; for that state which some people think is an intermediate state, viz. the absence of all pain, is not only pleasure but is even the greatest pleasure. For whoever perceives the

state which he is in must be in pleasure or in pain. But Epicurus thinks that the limit for the greatest pleasure is set by the absence of all pain; and though later [i.e., after all pain has been eliminated] pleasure can be varied and adorned, it cannot be increased or augmented.¹²

There are at least two ways to read the argument and neither one of them seems to get us to the conclusion that the absence of pain is the limit of pleasure. One way to interpret the argument Cicero presents runs contrary to Inwood and Gerson's translation of *doloris omnis privatio*.¹³ On this interpretation it would be better to read 'every removal of pain' since the discussion begins by focusing on the *process* in which pains are extinguished and concludes with a generalisation about the *state* in which pain is absent.

1. When we are freed from pain, we enjoy *the process* which brings us to the absence of pain.
2. Whatever we enjoy is pleasure
3. So every removal of pain (*omnis privatio*) is correctly called pleasure.
4. Generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place
5. So, there is no intermediate state between pleasure and pain.

There are at least two difficulties with the argument so understood, however. First, it is not clear that the move from 3 to 4 is justified. Perhaps the pleasure consists in the *process* of the removal of pain and when this

¹² Trans. Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 59.

¹³ I've been convinced that there are good philological grounds for preferring the way that Inwood and Gerson take it. The problem is *omnis*. It might be genitive and so in agreement with *doloris* or in the nominative modifying *privatio*. But there are three instances in the nearby context where *omnis* agrees with *doloris* and the one immediately before the line in question seems especially telling. It looks very much like Cicero must mean 'the removal of all pain'. I am indebted to Jonathon Barlow for putting the point to me so clearly.

process is completed, the pleasure ceases along with the pain. This is precisely Callicles' view—the experience of pleasure is analogous to the filling of a jar and there must be lack of space, i.e. pain, in order for there to be filling, i.e. pleasure. It might be that we could use an additional premise to smooth over this problem.

6. Whoever is aware of the way in which he is affected will necessarily either be in pleasure or in pain.

It isn't *quite* question-begging since it concerns only states of awareness whereas the conclusion in 5 concerns pleasure and pain generally. It does, however, require the controversial premise that if there were an intermediate state between pain and pleasure it would of necessity be a state of which the subject is unaware.

The second problem with this interpretation of Cicero's argument is that it concentrates only on showing that the absence of pain is correctly called pleasure. It seems to leave the further conclusion that it is the *limit* of the magnitude of pleasure untouched. This is asserted, but not argued for on this interpretation.

Gisela Striker has recently proposed a different interpretation which seeks to remedy this second flaw. She thinks that 1–3 need to establish that *all* pleasure consists in the absence of pain, not that the absence of pain is a *kind* of pleasure.¹⁴ Now, painlessness, strictly speaking, doesn't admit of degrees. When the dentist says that this is relatively painless what he really means is not that you will have a certain degree of painlessness, but that you will have a certain degree of pain: it will hurt you, but it won't hurt you as much as some other procedures might. If we could show that all pleasures consist in the absence of pain, it would indeed follow that the greatest possible pleasure is simply the absence of pain. The argument must run like this

¹⁴ Striker, 'Epicurean Hedonism'. Some further texts in support of Striker's view include Cicero *De finibus* 2.9; Plutarch *Non posse* 1088b and *Adversus Colotes* 1123a.

1. When we are freed from pain, we enjoy the state of the absence or removal of pain.
2. Whatever we enjoy is pleasure
3. So the complete removal of pain is what is rightly called [i.e. *constitutes*] pleasure (*recte nominata est voluptas*).

But this only relocates the problem, as Striker acknowledges, because the move from 1 and 2 to 3 requires a very bold generalisation: since whatever we enjoy is (a) pleasure and we enjoy the state of being freed from pain, *all* pleasures consist in the absence or removal of pain. We are no closer to an even mildly plausible argument for the desired conclusion.

4. A different argument for *aponia* and *ataraxia* as the limit

We seem to be at an impasse. I suspect that Cicero has presented us with an argument which can, at most, attempt to show that the absence of pain is a kind of pleasure. How then do we move from the claim that the absence of pain is, in fact, a pleasure to the claim that it is the greatest pleasure? This argument is not to be found in Cicero. However, reflections on the notion of the most pleasant life lead from the premise that the absence of pain is pleasure to the conclusion that it is the greatest pleasure. To see how this could be so let us consider *Letter to Menoecus* 128:

The unwavering contemplation of these [sc. the distinction between imaginary and natural desires] enables one to refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from disturbance, since this is the goal of a blessed life. For we do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. As soon as we achieve this state every storm in the soul is dispelled, since the animal is not in a position to go after some need nor seek something else to complete the good of the body and the soul. For we are in need of pleasure only when

we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need the pleasure.

It is very odd to speak of a *need* for pleasure when we are in pain. Needs typically involve two components: a thing which is needed and a goal the achievement of which the needful item is needed for.

What goal could Epicurus have in mind here? Let us suppose that the goal is the most pleasant—and so best—life. If you are a hedonist and if you think that there is some reasonably determinate answer to the question, 'What is the best life for man?', then you seem to be committed to the idea that there is a most pleasant kind of life. This is especially true if one takes seriously Aristotle's formal constraints on the highest good. Whatever the *telos* turns out to be, it must be complete (*teleion*, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a28). Now, in any ordinary sense, this limit to pleasure is no real limit at all, for surely one might answer that the best and most pleasant life is the one which has *unlimited* pleasure, or perhaps unlimited enjoyment of the very best pleasures. But in a very different context, Aristotle thinks that common sense supports his insistence that nothing unlimited is ever complete (*Physics* 207a14; cf. *Metaphysics* 1021b12). He rejects the idea that pleasure must be a process and therefore incomplete (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1173a29). Since pleasure is an activity it is, in fact, complete in a now (1174a15). But this will be insufficient to show that pleasure is *the good* and not merely one good among many, since the life of pleasure seems to be improved by the addition of other goods as well (1172b28). It is therefore not most choiceworthy. When a particular kind of life fails the most choiceworthy test, this is because there are goods outside the candidate life the addition of which makes it better. So this formal constraint is actually related to that broader and less technical sense of 'complete' that Aristotle invokes in the *Physics*. If a life is not most choiceworthy, then there is some good outside of it. That which always has something outside of it is *apeiron* and so fails to be *teleion* in this more basic sense.

¹⁵ Trans. Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 30.

These considerations might provide Epicurus with a reason to insist that pleasure has a limit. He can offer three reasons of his own: (1) The only thing which is really unlimited is the void. Any thing which *is* is limited. (2) More concretely, no human life could contain unlimited pleasure since we are finite creatures and the finite cannot contain the infinite. (3) Most convincingly, the good for man must be natural. It would be absurd to identify happiness with a condition which it is actually impossible for humans to attain.

How do we make sense of a limit for pleasure? We might try to do this with respect to the activities which furnish the pleasure. The best life is the one which contains the human activities that give rise to the best pleasures. But, even if we suppose that distinctively human activities must fit within the span of a human life, it is nonetheless true that many of the activities that we enjoy are repeatable. Moreover, for any pleasurable feeling one has, it seems possible to imagine it be more intense. Thus pleasure, considered in itself, has no internal mark by means of which we can distinguish a life that it best.

I want to suggest that Epicurus thinks that pain or distress form the limits of pleasure. He certainly thinks that they are mutually exclusive:

Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together.
Kuria doxa 3 (LS I.21C)

Pain, then, acts as a limit to pleasure by introducing a negative component in the measure of our well being. The idea, I suggest, is that *the best and most pleasant life is the life with the least pain in it*. But here we face an ambiguity. Is a life which has some painful episodes but many very pleasant ones less painful than a life which contains no painful feelings but very few of those 'pleasures of taste, sex and listening to music' that Epicurus cited with approval in *Peri telous* (Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 3.41)? Should we seek the lowest gross painfulness or lowest net painfulness?

Before I try to answer this question, however, it is first necessary to meet an objection to the way in which I have framed it. Annas argues that Epicurus' hedonism was very different to that of Bentham and did not

presuppose a quantitative approach toward the maximisation of pleasure. According to her, the final good for Epicurus is *ataraxia* and she defines this in terms of unhindered activity.

Such an aim, however, is clearly not definite enough to allow quantification even of a Benthamite kind. Pleasure understood as an untroubled overall state of is not the kind of thing that one can produce units of; nor does it even allow of quantitative comparison of an ordinary kind in any obvious way.¹⁶

It is not clear to me that the question about whether the most pleasant life is the one with the least pain *tout court* or the least pain on balance is sufficiently quantitative to distort the character of Epicurus' form of hedonism. Even if one doubted that all pleasures were commensurable in terms of measures like duration or intensity, one might well wonder quite generally whether it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. This is as much of a quantitative consideration as my present question requires.¹⁷ Pending some argument that even this level of concern about more and less is alien to Epicureanism, I will forge ahead.

¹⁶ Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 85–6.

¹⁷ Moreover, some aspects of Annas' positive discussion are rather puzzling. On the one hand, she insists that 'in living our lives we should aim at being in a state in which we are not bothered or troubled by bodily or mental troubles (*Morality of Happiness*, 337). This is *ataraxia*. She insists that such a condition cannot be increased or vary in intensity. It can be varied, however, inasmuch as we may undertake a variety of activities while in this untroubled state. But Epicurus seems to claim more than that *ataraxia*, considered as such, cannot admit of improvement. His astounding claim is that the life of *aponia* and *ataraxia* is such that no life could be *more pleasant*, regardless of its length or the kinds of activities in which one engaged in the course of it (*Kuria doxa* 3; *Vatican Sayings* 33, 42). When Annas confronts these radical claims that the length of life has no bearing on the agent's happiness, then the conception of happiness seems to shift very considerably from her first account: 'happiness is not to be identified with the course of our life as a whole, but with the inner attitude the agent has to that extended course, an attitude that is not dependent on the way that course goes on' (*Morality of Happiness*, 349–50). But this is surely Epicurus we are discussing now, not Epicurus.

The identification of the most pleasant life with the one which has the least pain *tout court* makes sense of many of Epicurus' more astounding claims. Consider three of these: (1) the claim that the absence of pain is itself pleasure; (2) the claim that *ataraxia* and *aponia* are the limits of pleasure and that there can be no further improvement upon these states; and (3) the notion that the life of the Epicurean sage would not be improved by being longer. If I enjoy a life in which pain and anxiety are completely absent, then I will have the lowest possible gross painfulness, 'level zero'. Now, I could only have the least pain by having the greatest pleasure. This is the point of the argument that there is no intermediate state. At any moment, I must be experiencing either pleasure or pain. So, if my life has the least pain in it, then it must have either the largest quantity of pleasures, or the most intense pleasures or the greatest pleasure. But, even if my life had been shorter and so had a smaller quantity of painless experience or lacked some very intense pleasure, my gross pain level would still have been zero. So the *ataraxia* and *aponia* are not only pleasure, but the greatest pleasure. It is thus clear that these two doctrines go hand in hand. It is also clear from *Letter to Menoceus* 128 that Epicurus thinks that the gross level of pain in a life is a measure of happiness. Consider again what he says in the last sentence quoted above: 'when we are not in pain, we have no need of pleasure'. This is just plain false from the level of pain on balance view. If I've just gone through a really terrible experience, then, even if I am not presently troubled, I still need all the wine, women and song I can get in order to lower my life-long net pain rating!

5. A tension at the heart of Epicurean hedonism

But things are not that simple. In fact, Epicurus also says things that are inconsistent with the gross pain criterion. If the goal of living is an existence as free from pain as possible, then there can be no justification for undergoing some pains in order to secure greater long term pleasures. But, of course, we do just this and Epicurus recognises and comments

wisdom and foresight in balancing present pains against the value of long term pleasures (*Letter to Menoecus* 129–30). Moreover, there is an obvious objection to the gross pain criterion. If the goal is to minimise the pain in one's life, then why not make an end to life now, for we may be certain that there will be unavoidable pains in the future?¹⁸ We should note that this is an objection that Epicurus addresses:

Much worse is he who says that it is good not to be born 'but when born to pass through the gates of Hades as quickly as possible' (*Theognis* 425, 427). For if he really believes what he says, why doesn't he leave life? For it is easy for him to do so if he has firmly decided upon it. But if he is joking, he is wasting his time among men who don't welcome it. We must remember that what will happen is neither unconditionally within our power nor unconditionally outside our power, so that we will not unconditionally expect that it will occur nor despair of it as unconditionally not going to occur. (*Letter to Menoecus* 126–7)

He is utterly small-minded for whom there are many plausible reasons for committing suicide. (*Vatican Saying* 38)¹⁹

The fact that Epicurus considers the objection, I think, points to one of two possibilities. The first is that my reading according to which the most pleasant life is the one which contains the least pain and suffering simpliciter was a common misconception. These two passages are intended to dismiss it as such. The second is that he really is committed to the gross painlessness criterion. His responses—when they go beyond abuse—point to a strategy which combines the goal of a life with minimal suffering with the life which has more pleasure than pain on balance. Naturally enough, I prefer to think that the second option is correct. Why? If my reading is a common misconception, then why doesn't he respond as he does in *Letter to Menoecus* 131 where he corrects the views of those who would cast the

¹⁸ It seems that there was a branch of the Cyrenaics who did embrace this absurd conclusion. Diogenes Laertius 2.93–6 and Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 1.83–4 relate the views of Hegesias. See also Wallace Matson's highly entertaining 'Hegesias the Death-Persuader'.

¹⁹ Inwood and Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 29, 38.

Epicureans as devotees of the sybaritic life? This is not merely an argument from silence. What he does go on to say in this passage about our expectations needs some sort of explanation. My reading goes on to suggest one.

6. Epicurean inclusivism

I would like to suggest that the *telos* for Epicurus is a complex one: it is the life which has as little pain and anxiety as possible *and also* the highest preponderance of pleasure over such pains as are unavoidable. It is the first constraint which makes us reject the strategy of the dissipated: even if we could achieve a preponderance of pleasures over pain by dint of wine, women and song (and one suspects that Epicurus thought we could not), we should still have lives marred by fear of death and pain. The second constraint prevents us from pursuing the Theognis strategy and topping ourselves before more pains come along. The last lines of *Letter to Menoecus* 127 and *Vatican Sayings* 38 each seem to appeal to our epistemic situation with respect to future pleasures and pains. The prospect of pleasures in the future gives us a reason not to end a presently painful situation with death only if the preponderance of pleasures over pains is somehow relevant to the good life.

Cicero (*De finibus* 1.40–1) also suggests that at some points Epicurus thinks of the *telos* as twofold. We are invited to compare two lives. One is filled with many and intense pleasures of body and mind and, moreover, is not spoiled by any pains or fears for the future. The other is a life filled with pain in which the subject has no expectation of relief from pain. Cicero concludes:

If the life filled with pain is the thing to be most avoided, then the greatest of evils is to live in pain; but it follows from this claim that the greatest good is the life of pleasure.²⁰

²⁰ 'quod si vita doloribus referta maxime fugienda est, summum profecto malum est vivere cum dolore; cui sententiae consentaneum est ultimum esse bonorum cum

Notice the ambiguity inherent in the conclusion. While we may agree that the worst life is the one which has the greatest possible pain in it, we do not yet know whether the most pleasant life is the one with the least pain *simpliciter* or the least pain and greatest pleasure on balance. But also notice Cicero's description of the pleasant life with which we compare the life of pain. It is one which involves both *aponia* and *ataraxia*, and also one in which the subject *magnis, multis, perpetuis fruentem et animo et corpore voluptatibus*.

The sort of argument employed in Cicero relies on Aristotle's formal conditions on the good.²¹ One of Aristotle's constraints is that the good must be most choiceworthy. The addition of something more cannot make it any better. If we consider the life which has no pain and anxiety, then it is possible to imagine a way in which it might be better: it could include some positive delights. (We must ignore at this point Epicurus' contention that *ataraxia* and *aponia* are the limits of pleasure for, as we saw, these are consequences of the identification of the good life with the one with the least pain and anxiety. It would clearly be circular to invoke these claims in defence of the identification itself.) On the other hand, let us consider a life in which we have a preponderance of pleasures over pains. This life too is not most choiceworthy since it could be improved if it had less pain in it. For this reason, the end is the life which includes the enjoyment of many intense pleasures of body and mind *as well as* the absence of pain and anxiety. This mixed life is just what Cicero describes.

This is a very funny situation indeed. The specification of the end in the *De finibus* 1.40-1 passage seems to involve two potentially incompatible components.²² We have already seen that pursuing a painless

voluptate vivere.' (*De finibus* 1.41)

²¹ The argument, of course, relies on a certain principle about opposites as well. We take the life which is least choiceworthy—the one we couldn't make worse by adding anything to—and suppose that its opposite is most choiceworthy. The problem is that it is not clear what the opposite of the pain filled life is.

²² Note that it seems likely that the various goods in the inclusivist reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* can come into conflict as well. Is it not possible

life and pursuing a life in which pleasure predominates over pain may involve very different choices. When we concentrate on the painlessness of the best life, we realise that this aspect of the end implies certain surprising results. These are the theses that the absence of pain is itself pleasure and that the absence of pain is the greatest pleasure. Taken together these make the preponderance of positive pleasures in the other aspect of the good life dispensable. If it is true that the most pleasant life is the one with the least pain, then it is true that the absence of pain is the greatest pleasure and such a life does not need the addition of positive pleasures to make it the best. But the identification of the best life with the painless one also brings with it an obvious objection—what I have called the Theognis objection—which necessitates the reintroduction of considerations about the level of pleasure in a life on balance. Only such considerations could stand behind Epicurus' abusive response to the objection.

Consider the tension in *Nicomachean Ethics* about the nature of the final good. Is it the inclusive end which has contemplation as well as the life of activity in accordance with the virtues of character or is it contemplation alone? You might think that the appropriate view to take is what Ackrill called the weak dominant end reading: happiness consists in a set of goods, but one of them makes a more significant contribution toward happiness than the others.²³ Thus, when conflicts arise between pursuing all the goods which constitute happiness, we ought to privilege this one. In

that I might find myself in a situation in which exercising the practical virtues leaves me no time for *theōria*? Suppose I were the only wealthy and competent person in the whole of my community. Striking the mean required by liberality and magnificence in such a context might exhaust all my spare time.

²³ Ackrill, 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia', 17. In this passage, Ackrill is sorting out the ambiguous use of 'dominant end' in earlier work on the *Ethics*. 'By a "dominant end" might be meant a *monolithic* end, an end consisting of just one valued activity or good, or there might be meant an end combining two or more independently valued goods which has a dominant or preponderating or paramount importance.' This second sense of 'dominant end' is weaker in as much as it does not entail the claim that happiness consists in just one thing. I will be using the term in its second sense.

fact, this seems to be Aristotle's attitude toward moral virtue as opposed to the externals in Bk 1. The power misfortune has to mar our blessedness is severely constrained by the contribution that virtue makes toward *eudaimonia*. What considerations might similarly give the exercise of the intellectual virtues in *theōria* a dominant role in securing happiness? Aristotle advances several, but central to them is greater self-sufficiency relative to even the virtues of character—and these themselves require no great quantity of external goods (1179a1–10). So, if we were tempted to think that the exercise of intellectual virtue contributes more to our happiness than does the exercise of the virtues of character, it would appear that one reason for this is that *theōria* is more readily available to us.

I want to suggest that Epicurus holds a similar inclusivist conception of the end. It is the life with the lowest level of unpleasantness and which, in addition, includes the enjoyment of the pleasures of body and mind. These two goals can come into conflict. If I pursued the first to the exclusion of the second, I would have a good reason to end my life at some points where, intuitively, we think this would be foolish. If I pursue the second to the exclusion of the first, then Epicurus seems to think such pleasures as I enjoy will always be marred by pain and anxiety. At the very least, it will be true to say that my life could have been better had I realised both goals. The dictum that the absence of pain is the limit of pleasure and that enjoyments beyond this vary but do not improve our condition is meant to express the idea that *aponia* and *ataraxia* are a weakly dominant end in Ackrill's sense. What justifies making *ataraxia* and *aponia* dominant in this way?

It is just not clear that either goal contributes more to our happiness. Consider again the life which pretty nearly approaches the goal of painlessness. Call it life A. We say that is not most choiceworthy in Aristotle's sense because it could be made better if it included some harmless delights. Now consider life B, it contains a great many enjoyments of body and soul, but, perhaps because our agent has never managed to expunge the fear of death, also a fair bit of *tarachē*. Life B is not most choiceworthy either, since it too would be more choiceworthy if it

didn't include the fear of death. Would *ataraxia* contribute more to the quality of life B than a few innocent delights would to life A? The answer to this question is not clear to me. What is clear and what sets *aponia* and *ataraxia* apart as a weakly dominant end in the Epicureans' telos is that it is *more easily in our power than the enjoyment of innocent delights is*. But why should this mean that these things make a greater contribution to our happiness? After all, it is more easily within one's power to get food that is bad for one's health than food that is good for you—MacDonalds really is much cheaper than most healthy vegetarian places! Why, then, should we expect that *ataraxia* and *aponia* will make a more significant contribution to our happiness than other pleasures simply because they require less power to secure?

6. Salvation is at hand!

I suspect that the answer is that *ataraxia* and *aponia* are regarded as a dominant end precisely because they are easily within everyone's power. Epicurus perhaps regarded it as an *a priori* constraint on the content of happiness that it was within everyone's power to achieve. We know, of course, that the Stoics criticised the Peripatetics for including the externals in their account of happiness. We see no such direct criticism of Aristotelian accounts of the good in Epicurean sources, but the thrust of Lucretius' proem to Bk 6 of *De rerum natura* makes it clear that our salvation does not reside in the acquisition of yet more advantages, but in the proper frame of mind in which to appreciate what we already have.

For when he saw how mortals had ready for them nearly all that need demands for living, and that, as far as they could, their life was established safe; saw how men were rolling in riches, mighty in honor and fame, proud and in good repute of their sons, while at home nevertheless each had an anxious heart; saw how they tormented their life in their own despite without any pause, and were compelled to wax furious with racking lamentations:—then he understood that the pot itself made the flaw, and that by this flaw an inward corruption tainted all that came in from without

though it were a blessing....Therefore with truth telling words he scoured the heart, he put a limit to desire and fear....²⁴

In some respects, the ready availability of the resources for happiness is Nature's gift. Hence, Epicurean sentiments like this one from Stobaeus:

I am grateful to blessed Nature, because she has made what is necessary easy to acquire and what is hard to acquire unnecessary. (*Anthology* 3.17.22 = Usener 469)

But on the other hand, our natures also incline us to overlook the fact that what we need for happiness we already have. Lucretius explains how the advantages of civilised life, like a simple cloak of animal skins, generate fruitless striving after more and more advantages and war.

Mankind labour always in vain and to no purpose, consuming its days in empty cares, plainly because it does not know the limits of possession and how far it is ever possible for real pleasure to grow; and this little by little has carried life out into the deep sea, and stirred up from the bottom the great billows of war.²⁵

What is necessary for the good life is the kind of knowledge that Epicurus is said to have brought to us. So precious is this knowledge, that Lucretius styles Epicurus a god for providing it to mankind in the proem to Bk 5.

We began with the impression that among this knowledge was the claim that we do not need political or economic power to secure our happiness. I have been arguing, however, that nothing other than an independent commitment to the idea that every individual's happiness is in the palm of her hand, ready for the taking, could generate the conclusion that *ataraxia* and *aponia* are a dominant end. If this is right, then the adunamic character of the Epicurean *telos* is not a consequence of the

²⁴ *De rerum natura* 6.9–26, trans. Rouse and Smith, *Lucretius*.

²⁵ *De rerum natura* 5.1430–5, trans. Rouse and Smith, *Lucretius*.

nature of their brand of hedonism. Rather, the belief that happiness is not improved by the delights that power can secure is in the background guiding his theorising about what happiness in fact is.

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