

Hedonistic Theories of Well Being in Antiquity  
Tim O’Keefe, Georgia State University

[Penultimate draft. Final version is in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher, Routledge, 2015, 29-39. Please cite that version.]

Ancient ethics is commonly, and rightly, characterized as “eudaimonistic.” At the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out the overall framework within which most ancient ethicists operate: the highest good is *eudaimonia*, or happiness, which is valuable for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Everything else that is valuable is valuable either as an instrumental means to achieving *eudaimonia* or as a constituent of *eudaimonia*. (For Aristotle, wealth would be an example of an instrumental means to *eudaimonia*, whereas interacting with your friends would be one of its constituents.) Aristotle notes that while everybody agrees that *eudaimonia* is the highest good, this is a “thin” agreement merely on what to *label* the highest good, as people sharply disagree on what the *substance* of *eudaimonia* is. (*NE* I 1095a17-22)<sup>1</sup>

The dominant strain of ancient ethics is objectivist and perfectionist: *eudaimonia* is not a state of mind. Instead, it is primarily or entirely constituted by virtue and virtuous activity, that is, by the perfection and exercise of our nature as rational and social animals. Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics differ on many important ethical questions, but they share a common commitment to the centrality of virtue and acting virtuously to the good life. Virtue is in itself noble and beautiful (*kalon*), and its possession is intrinsically beneficial to the virtuous person.

But there is an important and substantial countermovement within ancient ethics, which characterizes the highest good in subjectivist terms. Democritus, the inspiration for Epicurus’ atomistic metaphysics, denied that pleasure was the good, but he did identify the good with a state of mind: *euthumia*, or cheerfulness.<sup>2</sup> (*DL* IX 45) Socrates’ follower Aristippus was notorious for his willingness to flout conventions of what is proper in his pursuit of pleasure, although our reports conflict on whether he was a full-blown hedonist or not.<sup>3</sup> This article will concentrate on the Epicureans and Cyrenaics, who give the two fullest statements of subjectivist theories of well-being in antiquity, both of which explicitly identify pleasure as the highest good. The Epicureans and Cyrenaics fashioned

---

<sup>1</sup> Henceforward, references to this and other texts will be made according to the following conventions: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* = *NE*; Cicero, *De Finibus* (On Goals) = *Fin.*; *Tusculan Disputations* = *Tusc.*; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* = *Strom.*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* = *DL*; Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* (Principle Doctrines) = *KD*; Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* (Vatican Sayings) = *SV*; Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus = *Ep. Men.*; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (On the nature of Things) = *DRN*; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Learned* = *AM*, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* = *PH*.

<sup>2</sup> See Warren (2002) for an in-depth treatment of the ethics of Democritus and his successors. Democritus describes *euthumia* as a peaceful and well-settled state of the soul, undisturbed by fear, superstition, or emotion. Although our reports on Democritus’ ethics are too sparse to draw any conclusions confidently, *euthumia* appears to differ only verbally from the Epicurean conception of *ataraxia*, or tranquility, the mental pleasure that is the chief constituent of happiness.

<sup>3</sup> Tsouna McKirahan (1994) is a balanced and thoughtful consideration of what we can glean from our sources about the historical Aristippus. She concludes that Aristippus himself was not a hedonist, but that many reports attribute to him positions developed by later Cyrenaics. See n. 4.

their views against the backdrop of Plato's and Aristotle's extensive discussions of pleasure.<sup>4</sup> Both Plato and Aristotle believe that the best life for humans will be pleasant, but they also regard hedonism as mistaken and dangerous. Although our sources do not allow us to assert confidently that the Epicureans and Cyrenaics are reacting to Plato or Aristotle point by point in devising their positions, viewing their positions through the lens of Plato's and Aristotle's criticisms of hedonism is useful.

This entry will start with a consideration of how the Epicureans and Cyrenaics try to establish that pleasure is the highest good, before moving on to what each school says about the nature of pleasure. Then we will look at the role virtue plays (or does not play) in the acquisition of pleasure, and the place of epistemic goods such as knowledge of the workings of the world. The entry will close with a brief look at the ethics of the Pyrrhonian skeptics: although not hedonists, their ethics shares surprising affinities to the Epicureans' ethics while breaking from Epicureanism and the rest of the Greek ethical tradition in how to attain the good life.

## I. Hedonism and teleology

The two earliest extant arguments that try to establish that pleasure is the highest good are in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Both start from empirical observations of what is (supposedly) *pursued* for its own sake and derive conclusions about what is *good*. In his consideration of what pleasure is and how it figures into the happy life, Aristotle recounts the hedonistic arguments of Eudoxus, an astronomer, student of Plato, and older compatriot of Aristotle. Eudoxus believes that what is most choiceworthy is what is chosen for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and all animals, both rational and non-rational, seek pleasure. And we seek it for its own sake: we never ask somebody for the sake of what they're being pleased, since we assume that the pleasure is choiceworthy in itself. (*NE X 1172b9-28*) In *Protagoras* 351c-354e, Socrates gives a similar argument: we pursue pleasure for its own sake and avoid pain for its own sake. We do sometimes embrace pains and avoid pleasures, but that is never because we regard suffering as something in itself good or disdain pleasure as being in itself bad. Instead, we do so precisely because some pains produce more pleasure in the long run, and some pleasures lead to greater pain, and this shows that pleasure is good and pain bad.<sup>5</sup>

These arguments have some ambiguities: as stated, both arguments would seem to establish only that pleasure is *an* intrinsic good, not the *sole* intrinsic good. And in Eudoxus' argument, the relationship between the universal pursuit of pleasure and its goodness is unclear. He says that, just as each species of animal seeks the sort of food

---

<sup>4</sup> Both Epicurus and Aristippus the Younger, the main developer of the Cyrenaic positions in epistemology and ethics, post-date Aristotle. Unfortunately, the titular founder of the Cyrenaic school is Aristippus the Elder, grandfather of Aristippus the Younger, and disentangling their exact contributions is often difficult.

<sup>5</sup> Socrates' defense of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is surprising, given the sharp criticisms of hedonism in many of Plato's other dialogues. If we assume that the *Protagoras* is consistent with other dialogues—perhaps not a safe assumption—the easiest maneuver to maintain consistency is to look at the dramatic context of Socrates' defense and maintain that we should not take him to be advancing these claims *in propria persona*. (Annas (1999) 167-171 convincingly argues this.) However, see Rudebusch (1999) for an attempt to attribute hedonism to Socrates in the *Protagoras* and make it consistent with what he says in other dialogues such as the *Gorgias*.

that is good for it, all animals seek pleasure. This suggests that perhaps the universal pursuit of pleasure acts as *evidence* for its goodness, rather than being the *reason* for its goodness, just as we may take the characteristic pursuit of some sort of food by a species as evidence that that sort of food is good for those animals, rather than thinking that the food is good for them just because they all pursue it.<sup>6</sup>

The Epicureans and Cyrenaics put forward the same basic argument in favor of hedonism while clearing up these ambiguities. The Cyrenaics say that we are all instinctively attracted to pleasure and we seek for nothing further when we have it, and this is why pleasure is the end. (*DL* II 88) The Epicureans assert that the end is what is *sought* for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and that the one thing that all animals seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else is pleasure. This psychological fact is supposed to be especially evident when we look at the behavior of infants. (Cic. *Fin* I 29-30)

To this behavioral argument, the Cyrenaics and Epicureans add an affective proof of pleasure's goodness and pain's badness. Pleasure is agreeable to all living things, pain repellent, say the Cyrenaics (*DL* II 87), and our affections are the criteria for what is good and bad: our approval of pleasure is what makes it good, our disapproval of pain what makes it bad. (Sextus Empiricus, *AM* vii 199-200) Likewise, the Epicureans claim that no long argument is needed to establish the goodness of pleasure and the badness of pain: all that is required is to draw our attention to what each is like in our experience.<sup>7</sup> (Cic. *Fin.* I 30) (If somebody doubts that pain is bad, kick them in the shin.)

So the Cyrenaics and Epicureans ground our end in our goal-directed behavior and our pro-attitudes. One could accept this overall approach to determining what our good is while rejecting hedonism by rejecting the supposed psychological facts that support it.<sup>8</sup> Critics of hedonism like Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics do reject the hedonists' accounts of motivation. But more fundamentally, they reject their approach, because they believe that there are normative standards external to what we happen to pursue and approve of that we should use to evaluate them. (Thus, even though the positions needn't have lined up this way, it's probably no coincidence that the dominant strain of Greek ethics, with its objectivist and perfectionist view on *eudaimonia*, is advanced by philosophers with teleological world-views, whereas the subjectivist countermovement consists of philosophers who do not have this sort of world-view. Aristotle believes that our reason has a function that it fulfills when it understands and contemplates the truths of cosmology and theology, whereas the Epicureans think that organisms and their parts have no inherent purposes or functions, even though they are able to do various things. [*DRN* V 772–1090])

For Plato, pleasant things obviously *appear* to be good, and to that limited extent would agree with Epicurus. But a yummy pastry that seems good might not promote the genuine good of the body, which is health, and a flattering piece of oratory that seems good might not promote the genuine good of soul, which is for the soul to have its proper

---

<sup>6</sup> Warren (2009) ably navigates the intricacies of Eudoxus' argument.

<sup>7</sup> Sedley (1998) explores the epistemological basis for Epicurean ethics in the feelings.

<sup>8</sup> R. B. Perry's naturalistic theory of the good is an excellent example of this. For Perry, goodness consists in being liked and sought for its own sake, and badness in being disliked and being avoided for its own sake. But he is not a hedonist, because hedonism is far too narrow concerning what we do try to obtain and avoid for their own sakes. (Perry (1914) 148-9)

order and organization. (*Gorgias* 462b-466a, 506c-507c) For Aristotle, not all pleasures are good: the value of a pleasure depends on the value of what it is you are taking pleasure in, and so taking pleasure in an excellent activity is good and beneficial, while taking pleasure in a base activity is bad and harmful. (*NE* 1175b24-33)

## II. The nature of pleasure

Although the Epicureans and Cyrenaics agree that pleasure is the good, they sharply disagree on its nature. For the Cyrenaics, both pleasure and pain are psychic “movements,” the former a smooth motion we find congenial, the latter a rough motion we find repellent. (*DL* II 86-87) We can distinguish between bodily and mental pleasures and pains, e.g., the pleasure of receiving a backrub versus the pleasure of delighting in the prosperity of your country. They held that bodily pleasures are far better than mental ones, and bodily pains much worse than mental ones, and offered as evidence for this that we punish offenders with bodily pains. (*DL* II 90) How this argument is supposed to go is not entirely clear, but perhaps it is supposed to show that we abhor bodily pains far more than mental ones, which makes them more effective punishments for both retributive and deterrence. One source identifies the end for the Cyrenaics as bodily pleasure (*DL* II 87), although it would make more sense for the Cyrenaics to include both mental and bodily pleasures in the end, insofar as both are pleasures.

The Epicurean view on pleasure is much more complicated and idiosyncratic. They also accept the distinction between bodily and mental pleasures and pains, but reverse their priority. Bodily pleasures depend just upon the present state of my body, e.g., I am in bodily pain if I am being beaten by a baseball bat. But mental pleasures and pains encompass the past and future too, through memory and anticipation. Even if my bodily state is perfectly OK right now, if I know that several large people are waiting outside my office and will administer to me a sound thrashing with their baseball bats, the anxiety caused by my anticipation of this future bodily pain is itself painful. And when Epicurus was dying painfully, he said that he still felt blessed because counterbalancing the excruciating pain of his kidney stones was the joy he felt at the memory of his past philosophical conversations. (*DL* X 22) In fact, the Epicureans recommend training yourself to recall sweet memories as a way to always have pleasure available. (*Cic. Fin.* I 57)

The Epicureans also distinguish between “kinetic” and “static” pleasures. Epicurean “kinetic” pleasures are similar to Cyrenaic pleasures *tout court*: they’re psychic “movements” that we find congenial. They are also often associated with the process of fulfilling some desire, e.g., the sensation I feel as I’m eating while hungry. But what of the state I am in *after* I have eaten my fill, when I am satiated and no longer hungry? A key Epicurean innovation is to insist that this sort of state is not merely neutral between pleasure and pain, but is itself a kind of pleasure: a “static” pleasure. *Aponia*, or freedom from bodily distress, is bodily static pleasure: the state of not being hungry, thirsty, cold, etc. The simple principle that allows us to declare that it is a pleasure and not merely a neutral state is that anything we delight in is a pleasure, just as anything that distresses us is a pain. (*Cic. Fin.* I 37) And we delight in being free of pain or need.

In the case of the mind, “joy” is labeled as a mental kinetic pleasure, while tranquility (*ataraxia*) is mental static pleasure: the state of being free from regret, anxiety, and other mental turmoil.

The Cyrenaics deny that merely being free of pain is a kind of pleasure, and they claim that, for Epicurus, the happiest person is a corpse or somebody asleep (Clement, *Strom.* ii 2 130.7-8, *DL* II 88). But this criticism is unfair. Although corpses are free from pain and anxiety, they are not tranquil and do not take delight in being free from fear. While *aponia* and *ataraxia* are defined negatively as freedom from bodily and mental pain, they are still positive mental states that require a person to be aware of them to be pleasures.

Not only are static pleasures genuine pleasures, the Epicureans claim that the removal of all pain is the limit of pleasure (*KD* 3), and that once this limit is reached, pleasure cannot be increased but only varied (*KD* 18). So the pinnacle of happiness, for the Epicureans, is to achieve both *aponia* and *ataraxia*, with *ataraxia* being far more important. (As Epicurus’ own dying example is supposed to show, a person who is able to maintain his cheerfulness and tranquility even in the face of great bodily distress will find his situation on balance satisfying and pleasant, even though he would prefer not to suffer the bodily pain.) So even though the Epicureans are hedonists, it turns out that their ethics is chiefly about how to achieve tranquility, as tranquility is the main constituent of the pleasant life.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Hedonism, the virtues, and happiness

The most serious charge leveled against hedonism as a theory of well being is that it cannot accommodate a proper respect for the virtues; hedonism would justify vicious and shameful actions. Plato depicts the hedonist Callicles as rejecting conventional standards of self-control, respecting others, and taking one’s fair share in his unbridled pursuit of pleasure. (*Gorgias* 482c-494b) Cicero thinks that hedonism would justify actions like breaking a promise to a friend on his deathbed when you stand to gain greatly from your betrayal and you know that your betrayal would never be detected. (Cic. *Fin* II 53-60)

This charge is particularly acute for ancient hedonists, as compared to modern thinkers such as Sidgwick who also have hedonistic theories of well being, because in ancient ethics generally there is no bifurcation between prudential and moral standards of practical reasoning.<sup>10</sup> So the ancient hedonist will not respond that betraying your friend by breaking your promise to him is *prudentially* preferable (because it most effectively

---

<sup>9</sup> Why static pleasures are the greatest pleasures and why, once the state of freedom from pain has been attained, pleasure can be “varied” but not increased, is not entirely clear. The place of kinetic pleasures in the Epicurean theory of the highest good is also unclear: on the one hand, as pleasures, they should be intrinsically good, while the Epicurean discussions of freedom from pain as the limit of pleasure seems to exclude them in preference to the static pleasures of *aponia* and *ataraxia*. Some attempts to work through these questions are Gosling and Taylor (1982) chapters 18-20, Purinton (1993), and Striker (1996).

<sup>10</sup> See Sidgwick (1907) for an important example of such bifurcation, and especially the concluding chapter, where he argues that the two cannot be reconciled with one another.

promotes your pleasure) but *morally* impermissible (e.g., because it does not maximize overall happiness or because it does not display a proper respect for your friend).

That's not to say that ancient ethicists didn't recognize that prudential and moral evaluations of an action often seem to diverge sharply. The point of the Ring of Gyges thought-experiment offered by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* (*Republic* II 359a–360d) is that standards of justice constrain a person's actions, so that when somebody could be absolutely confident of escaping detection and thus the negative consequences of acting unjustly, acting unjustly in order to get what you want would (apparently) be in your self-interest. And in Plato's dialog the *Gorgias*, Polus says that when a tyrant unjustly inflicts horrific suffering on his enemies, the tyrant's actions are more *shameful* than his victims' suffering, but the suffering is (prudentially) *worse* than engaging in the wrongdoing. (*Gorgias* 466a-475d)

Characters like Polus and Glaucon, who think that prudential and moral standards sometimes diverge, do not conclude that moral standards override prudential standards. Instead, Polus thinks that so much the worse for morality: he celebrates the life of the shameful tyrant. And Glaucon, who considers himself a friend of justice and is anxious to defend its value, requests that Socrates show how it is always prudentially better to be a just person than an unjust person, even in cases where the just person suffers terrible consequences because of his justice. When confronted with this request, Socrates tries to show how being a morally upright and just person is in that person's self-interest, rather than rejecting the request as misguided.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics try to reconcile the demands of morality and prudence, not by making morality subservient to prudence, but by incorporating morality into their conceptions of well-being. For example, Aristotle believes that the virtuous person will recognize the fineness of his virtuous friend's character and will seek to promote his friend's welfare for the friend's sake. But in acting in this way, in doing what is noble and praiseworthy, the virtuous person is thereby living well as a human being and fulfilling his *telos*, and he is thus achieving *eudaimonia*. (*NE* 1168a28-1169b1) Conversely, the vicious person is both morally reprehensible and living badly as a human being, expressing defects of character and of practical rationality, and thus unhappy.

The Epicureans try to accommodate the virtues in a more straightforward fashion: the virtues are valuable only instrumentally, for the sake of bringing about pleasure, but are nonetheless necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*. An unbridled seeker of pleasure, like Callicles in the *Gorgias*, will end up having a miserable life. While all pleasures are good and all pains bad, not all pleasures are choiceworthy, and not all pains are to be avoided. Many pleasurable activities have bad long-term consequences, and the wise person avoids them, picking and choosing among pleasures and pains in a way that makes her life as a whole pleasant. (*Ep. Men.* 129–130)

---

<sup>11</sup> Prichard (1912) gives a classic (and influential) argument that trying to show that morality is in your self-interest, as Plato does in the *Republic*, is a mistake.

Epicurus says that prudence is the source of all of the other virtues. (*Ep. Men.* 132; *KD* 5). For instance, the prudent person cultivates moderation, because indulging excessive desires for luxurious food and drink damages your bodily health, and possessing these excessive desires that are difficult to satisfy causes anxiety and leads to conflicts with other people. The Epicureans give similar hedonic justifications for the other virtues. While Epicurus is happy to talk about picking and choosing among pleasures and pains, the main emphasis in Epicurean ethics is not on what particular actions to perform, but on cultivating the sort of character that will bring about tranquility. In general, the Epicureans recommend reducing your desires and living simply in order to gain happiness. Vain and empty desires for fame, political power, or great luxury should be eliminated, because they are hard to satisfy and are desires for things we don't really need anyway, whereas desires for food, hydration and basic shelter are both natural to us as human beings and are necessary, either for living at all or at least for living comfortably. (*Ep. Men.* 127)

By making the virtues strictly instrumentally valuable, they open themselves up to the charge of unfriendly critics like Cicero that the demands of virtue and prudence will diverge in cases of undetectable betrayals of friends or violations of justice. But the Epicureans stick to their guns and insist that such cases do not arise. The badness of injustice does not consist merely in getting punished if you are caught, but in the anxiety you will experience worrying that you *might* get caught, even if you are not. And we can never be utterly confident that our wrongdoing will escape detection. (*KD* 34-35) Besides which, the prudent wise person who has limited her desires has little to gain by engaging in unjust actions. Friendship is by far the greatest means by securing happiness. (*KD* 27) It allows us to face the future without fear, knowing that our friends will help us out if we are in need, and we pledge likewise to help them when they are in need. But trust is absolutely essential to having these mutually beneficial relationships. The risks you run in betraying a friend and ruining your reputation, and the anxiety attendant upon running that risk, are never worth any potential gain. In fact, the Epicureans claim that hedonic calculations can justify caring for your friend as much as you care for yourself (*Cic. Fin.* I 65-70), and that the wise person will sometimes die for his friend.<sup>12</sup> (*DL* X 121)

Although the Epicureans try to accommodate the virtues, justice and friendship within a hedonistic ethics, Epicurus sharply rejects Aristotle's account of what motivates the virtuous person. For Aristotle, the truly virtuous person acts for the sake of the *kalon*, the noble or beautiful, i.e., because he recognizes the intrinsic value of virtue, while Epicurus says that he spits upon the *kalon* and on those who vainly admire it, whenever it does not produce pleasure (*Ath. Deipnosophists* 12, 547a) and that those who burble on about the virtues and wisdom are really referring to nothing other than the means to producing pleasures.<sup>13</sup> (*Cic. Tusc.* III 42)

---

<sup>12</sup> Some later Epicureans assert that the wise person come to care about his friend for the friend's own sake. See Evans (2004) for a discussion of whether the Epicureans can justify caring for one's friend as much as myself on purely hedonic and instrumentalist ground.

<sup>13</sup> See O'Keefe (2010) 107-173 for a more detailed exposition of Epicurean ethics.

The Cyrenaics are far more cynical (in the modern sense) and iconoclastic than the Epicureans when it comes to the virtues. There is some overlap: they agree that the good person is deterred from acting unjustly by the penalties for wrongdoing imposed and the risk of a bad reputation (*DL* II 92-3), and that we make friends from self-interested motives. (*DL* II 91) But they deny that every wise person lives pleasantly and every fool painfully: instead, this is true only for the most part. (*DL* II 91) Furthermore, even pleasures resulting from the most shameful conduct are good. (*DL* II 88) Epicurus would agree, while insisting that such pleasures are not *choiceworthy*. But characteristically, the Cyrenaics bite bullets that the Epicureans try to dodge. The later Cyrenaic Theodorus asserts that actions like theft and adultery are sometimes allowable. The idea that such actions are by nature base and thus to be avoided is just a prejudice used to keep the foolish masses in line, and the wise person will indulge his passions openly without regard for the circumstances. (*DL* II 99) And rather than fitting friendship within a hedonistic ethics, the later Cyrenaic Hegesias denies that friendship exists, because we all act from self-interested motives. (*DL* II 93)

The Cyrenaics are dubious that engaging in the sort of prudent picking and choosing among pleasures and pains that Epicurus recommends will result in achieving a happy life. Hegesias taught that it is impossible to achieve happiness, because both the body and soul are full of suffering. (*DL* II 93) Death, therefore, takes away great evils, and Hegesias was supposedly banned from giving public lectures because many audience members would kill themselves after he spoke. (*Cic. Tusc.* I 83-4)

More generally, the Cyrenaics stand out as the only ancient Greek ethicists to explicitly reject eudaimonism. Epicurus reconciles hedonism and eudaimonism by identifying the happy (*eudaimôn*) life with the pleasant life, and then saying that this life is the highest good. The Cyrenaics instead say that the end is particular pleasure, which is desirable for its own sake. Happiness is the sum of particular pleasures, past, present, and future, and it is not desirable for its own sake, but only for the sake of the particular pleasures that compose it. (*DL* II 87-88) This might still seem to justify acting prudently, insofar as we value those particular pleasures for their own sakes and prudence will help us obtain them. But even though they describe prudence as an instrumental good (*DL* II 91), they also think that accumulating the pleasures that produce happiness is most disagreeable, because it involves choosing present pain for the sake of future pleasure (*DL* II 90), and they seem not to advocate it.

The reason for this lack of future-concern is not clear: they may believe that carefully planning for the future in order to maximize pleasure is self-defeating, because they are skeptical about our ability to gain knowledge of the external world and because of their belief (*contra* Epicurus) that the memory of past pleasures and anticipation of future pleasures are not themselves pleasant. (*DL* II 88) The Annicerian sect of Cyrenaics appear to give a different reason: they deny that life as whole has any end, instead saying that there is a special end for each action—the pleasure resulting from the action. (Clement, *Strom.* ii 2 130.7-8) This suggests that they view what is good for an agent at any time to be a function of the particular pleasures that agent is striving for at that time,



with no further overarching end to unify these particular goods.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. Hedonism and epistemic goods

Another charge leveled against hedonism as a theory of well-being is that it cannot accommodate epistemic goods in the happy life. In Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates is examining the life of pleasure versus the life of knowledge, to see which is preferable. (*Philebus* 20d-21d) He argues that a life with the greatest pleasures but devoid of memory, knowledge, or reason—and thus lacking even the memory that you have enjoyed yourself, the knowledge that you are enjoying yourself, and the ability to figure out that how to obtain future pleasures for yourself—would not be a human life, but the life of a mollusk or some other shellfish. Similarly, Aristotle argues that the vulgar and servile masses who think the good is pleasure prefer a bovine life, not a properly human one. (*NE* I 1095b15-20)

Just as with the virtues and virtuous activity, both Plato and Aristotle incorporate epistemic goods as constituents of *eudaimonia*. For Plato, the rational part of the human *psyche* loves learning and wisdom, and a person who has achieved an understanding of the truth has satisfied the highest and finest part of himself. For Aristotle, the life of theoretical contemplation is happiest life. The person who has achieved an understanding of the basic principles of theology, ontology and cosmology, and then spends his time contemplating these truths, has best fulfilled his nature as a rational being. (*NE* X 7-8)

And as with the virtues, the Epicureans try to give theoretical knowledge a place in the good life by arguing that it has instrumental value in securing us pleasure. In a few places, Epicureans appear to assert that we can find intellectual activity immediately pleasurable: the Epicurean poet Lucretius describes his awe at beholding the wondrous workings of the universe, as revealed by Epicurus (*DRN* III 28–30), and Epicurus says that the process of learning philosophy is pleasant (*SV* 27) and that the wise person takes more pleasure in contemplation than others do. (*DL* X 120) But these passages are exceptional. Instead, theoretical knowledge is needed to order to banish fear of the gods and of death and obtain tranquility. We cannot live tranquilly if we are troubled about the gods or other creatures depicted in superstitious myths possibly harming us, and we need natural science to understand the causes of natural phenomena and dispel such fears. (*KD* 11–13) The Epicureans believe that, *if* death is annihilation, it is not bad and should not be feared. Your death will not be bad for you, as after your death you will not exist to suffer any misfortune. And since your death will not be bad for you when it arrives, fearing it now is irrational. (*Ep. Men* 125) But we need to have a proper understanding of the nature of the *psyche*, that it is a corporeal organ that dies along with the rest of the body, in order to be secure *that* death is annihilation, rather than possibly a hazardous transition to an afterlife.

The Cyrenaics do not try to find any role for theoretical knowledge in the good life, for the simple reason that they believe it is impossible for us to gain such knowledge, as noted above. They believe that we cannot know the nature of the external objects that

---

<sup>14</sup> O'Keefe (2002) explores these questions.

cause our affections, and they abandon the study of nature because of its uncertainty. (*DL* II 92)

## V. The Pyrrhonian Sceptics

As represented in the writings of Sextus Empiricus (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), the Pyrrhonian skeptic is an investigator of philosophical and scientific claims. He does not claim to know the truth, unlike dogmatic philosophers such as Aristotle and the Epicurus, and he suspends judgment on the metaphysical and ethical questions he is investigating, e.g., on the nature of the gods or on whether cannibalism is by nature bad. But unlike the Cyrenaics, he also does not claim that it is impossible to apprehend the way things are; on this epistemic question, too, he suspends judgment. So the Pyrrhonian skeptic has no philosophical doctrines, in the sense of positive or negative commitments. But he does have a distinctive skill: a knack for bringing to bear opposing arguments and appearances on the questions he is investigating, so as induce suspension of judgment both in himself and in the people with whom he is interacting. (*PH* I 1-11)

Sextus sketches out a subjectivist position on well-being with affinities to the Epicurean position. It is not hedonist, at least by label: Sextus says that, unlike the Cyrenaics, the Pyrrhonians do not believe that pleasure is the *telos*. But Sextus is here contrasting the Pyrrhonian *telos* with Cyrenaic hedonism in particular, according to which pleasure is a “smooth motion.” For the Pyrrhonians, the end is tranquility (*ataraxia*), which the Epicureans regard as the limit of mental pleasure and the main constituent of the happy life. (*PH* I 215)

Sextus accepts the standard Aristotelian definition of the *telos*, the end or aim. It is that for the sake of which everything else is done, without itself being pursued for the sake of anything else, and it is the final object of desire. (*PH* I 25) But like the Epicureans and others who do not have a teleological world-view, the skeptic looks to what is, as a matter of fact, pursued and desired to discern what the *telos* is. And the skeptic, as a matter of fact, pursues two things for their own sakes: tranquility, and having moderate feelings regarding things which are unavoidable. (*PH* I 25) Tranquility is a calmness of the soul and freedom from disturbance. (*PH* I 10) Having moderate feelings regarding things which are unavoidable is akin to the Epicurean static bodily pleasure of *aponia*, or freedom from bodily distress, but more modest. Because he is human, the skeptic will inevitably shiver when cold and suffer from other bodily disturbances, and he won't like them, but he aims at not being bothered by such states as much as other people are. (*PH* I 29-30)

While the skeptical and Epicurean ends overlap considerably, the skeptic's claims on behalf of his end are much more limited. The skeptic is simply describing what he goes for, without any commitment to its being what all animals pursue for its own sake. Likewise, the Epicureans believe that the goodness of pleasure is obvious in our experience of it, whereas the skeptic, while he cannot deny that tranquility appears good to him, suspends judgment on whether it is good by nature. (That tranquility appears

good to the skeptic is good enough to allow him to go after it, without needing to think that this appearance is accurate.)

In fact, suspending judgment on what is good and bad by nature is the main way the skeptic achieves tranquility. Sextus says that those who believe things to be good and bad by nature pursue the purported “natural” good with too much intensity, and when they achieve the “natural” good, they are elated beyond measure, whereas the skeptic is much more relaxed about things. (*PH I* 27-8) Suspending judgment on what is good and bad by nature also helps the skeptic achieve moderate feelings regarding what is unavoidable: since he does not regard being chilly or thirsty as bad by nature, they don’t bother him as much as they do most people, who suffer both from the unpleasant feelings and from the belief that they’re undergoing something that is bad by nature. (*PH I* 30)

Far from regarding epistemic goods as constituents of happiness or even as instrumental for achieving it, the skeptic is skilled at avoiding epistemic commitments. While Sextus targets ethical beliefs as particularly destructive of tranquility, the skeptic avoids beliefs generally—at least beliefs concerning the unclear subjects that are the targets of scientific and philosophical inquiry.<sup>15</sup> (*PH I* 13) At first, says Sextus, the skeptic investigated the vexing anomalies in things in order to resolve them, discover the truth, and thereby achieve tranquility. But being unable to resolve them, and seeing that competing accounts of the phenomena were equally balanced, the skeptic suspended judgment, and then—fortuitously—he thereby achieved peace of mind. (*PH I* 28-9) In this way, they are following the example of Pyrrho (c.365–270), who achieved peace of mind as a result of holding no opinions on the way things are. It is for this reason that the Pyrrhonian skeptics named themselves after him, even though the Pyrrhonian movement was founded centuries after Pyrrho’s death.<sup>16</sup> (*PH I* 7)

The Pyrrhonian skeptic has fairly little concern with virtue. That’s not at all to say that the skeptic will engage in immoral activities whenever he thinks that they will help him achieve what is (prudentially) preferable. The skeptic claims to have a practice which allow him to live correctly, but “correctly” simply in the humdrum sense that he is able to live in conformity with the conventions and laws of his society. (*PH I* 17) So, for example, the skeptic is pious toward the gods, in the sense that he follows the laws and customs of his society regarding the gods, and he accepts that piety is good and impiety bad.<sup>17</sup> Going along with the laws and customs allows him to live “well” and virtuously in this modest sense, as well as helping him live an untroubled life. But given the conflicting standards of different societies and philosophers regarding what is fine and

---

<sup>15</sup> Sextus says that while the skeptic has no beliefs about the way things *are*, e.g., that the honey is really sweet, he is able to live by following the appearances, e.g., that the honey *seems* sweet to him. (*PH I* 19-22). How exactly to understand Sextus on this point is not itself clear: does following the appearances involve having some sort of (humdrum everyday) belief or not? Burnyeat and Frede (1997) is a collection of classic papers on this subject, and Eichorn (2014) a recent contribution that argues that scholars have made Pyrrhonian psychology and ethics unnecessarily alien and unattractive.

<sup>16</sup> How much substantive overlap there is between the Pyrrhonian skeptics and their namesake is a vexed question. The best book on this question and on Pyrrho generally is Bett (2000). He concludes that Pyrrho himself was not a skeptic.

<sup>17</sup> Thorsrud (2011) is a useful discussion of skeptical piety.

base, the skeptic will not affirm that the customary standards he follows are the correct ones or the virtues he cultivates perfections of human nature in Aristotle's sense. This embrace of conventional values sets Sextus against not only Aristotle, but even against fellow subjectivists like the Epicureans, who affirm that we need to use our reason to discover what truly conduces to our happiness, which would include discerning which social practices are useful and which are pernicious.<sup>18</sup>

## RELATED TOPICS

Aristotle  
Death  
Desire-fulfillment theory  
Epistemic goods  
Experience Requirement  
Hedonism  
Plato  
Pleasure

## References

- Annas, J. (1993) *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Annas, J. (1999) *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bett, R. (2000) *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burnyeat, M. & Frede, M. (1997) *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Evans, M. (2004) "Can Epicureans Be Friends?" *Ancient Philosophy* 24: 407-424.
- Eichorn, R. (2014) "How (Not) To Read Sextus Empiricus," *Ancient Philosophy* 34: 121-149.
- Frede, D. (2006) "Pleasure and pain in Aristotle's ethics," in Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Malden: Blackwell. 255--275.
- Gosling, J. C. B., and Taylor, C. C. W. (1982) *The Greeks on Pleasure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moss, J. (2006) "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72: 503 - 535.

---

<sup>18</sup> Thorsrud (2003) explores how Pyrrhonian skepticism challenges the near-consensus of Greek ethicists that our reason has a positive role to play in achieving happiness.

- O'Keefe, T. (2002) "The Cyrenaics on Pleasure, Happiness, and Future-Concern," *Phronesis* 47: 395-416.
- O'Keefe, T. (2010) *Epicureanism*. Durham: Acumen.
- Perry, R. B. (1914) "The definition of value," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 11: 141-162.
- Prichard, H. A. (1912) "Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?" *Mind* 21: 21-37.
- Purinton, J. (1993) "Epicurus on the *telos*," *Phronesis* 38: 281-320.
- Rudebusch, G. (1999) *Socrates, Pleasure, and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sedley, D. (1998) "The Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics," in Stephen Everson (ed.), *Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 129–50.
- Sidgwick, H. E. (1907) *The Method of Ethics*. London: Macmillan and Company.
- Striker, G. (1996) "Epicurean Hedonism," in her *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 77–91.
- Thorsrud, H. (2003) "Is the Examined Life Worth Living? A Pyrrhonian Alternative," *Apeiron* 36: 229-249.
- Thorsrud, H. (2011) "Sextus Empiricus on skeptical piety," in Diego E. Machuca (ed.), *New Essays on Ancient Pyrrhonism*. Leiden: Brill. 91-111.
- Tsouna, V. (1998) *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsouna McKirahan, V. (1994) "The Socratic Origins of the Cynics and Cyrenaics," in P. Vander Waerdt (ed.), *The Socratic Movement*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press. 367-391
- Warren, J. (2002) *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warren, J. (2009) "Aristotle on Speusippus on Eudoxus on pleasure," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 36: 249-81.