

Cyrenaics

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The Cyrenaics were one of the ‘minor Socratic’ schools, founded by Aristippus (4th century BCE), a follower of Socrates, although its theory was largely formulated by Aristippus’ grandson, (confusingly) named Aristippus too. The Cyrenaics were hedonists (see: HEDONISM) and egoists (see: EGOISM) well outside the mainstream of Greek ethics (see: ANCIENT ETHICS). Later Cyrenaics argued against the more moderate hedonism of Epicurus and modified the Cyrenaic ethical doctrines. The school died out around the middle of the 3rd century BCE.

Our knowledge of the Cyrenaics is limited; we have none of their writings and must rely on much later reports, often sketchy or unreliable, to reconstruct their philosophy. The most extensive report comes from Book II of Diogenes Laertius’ gossip *Lives of the Philosophers* (especially sections 86-100), although other sources (many collected in the appendices of Tsouna (1998) and O’Keefe (2002)) are also important.

Like almost all other Greek ethicists, the Cyrenaics think that the highest good is what is valuable intrinsically (i.e., for its own sake) and not instrumentally (i.e. for the sake of anything else), and they hold that only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain intrinsically bad. They give two arguments for this position. First, all creatures find pleasure agreeable and pain repellent. Second, we all instinctively pursue pleasure for its own sake and want nothing more having achieved it, and likewise shun pain. Thus, they start from observations about what is valued for its own sake and sought for its own sake, and their basis draw conclusions about what is intrinsically valuable and choiceworthy.

The Cyrenaics conceive of both pleasure and pain as psychic ‘movements’: the former smooth, the latter rough. Epicurus held that lack of mental turmoil (*ataraxia*, or tranquility) and of bodily distress (*aponia*) were themselves ‘static’ pleasures. The Cyrenaics disagree: merely lacking pain is no more a pleasure than lacking pleasure is a pain, and they mocked Epicurus by noting that corpses are free of pain and anxiety. The Cyrenaics also distinguish themselves from Epicurus by insisting that bodily pleasures are far better than mental pleasures, and bodily pains far worse than mental ones. The reasons for this doctrine are not clear. A plausible guess is that bodily pleasures and pains are generally more vivid and intense than mental ones. This guess fits with their argument that criminals are punished with bodily pains, not mental ones, because bodily pains are worse: the pain of flogging does seem more intense than that of anxiety.

Nothing is by nature just or unjust, or honorable or base, according to the Cyrenaics. Instead, these are determined by the laws and customs of particular societies. Furthermore, being a just and honorable person is not intrinsically good, but merely instrumentally good. The wise person adheres to the standards of justice and honor for prudential reasons, like avoiding censure and punishment. Many of the stories surrounding the elder Aristippus depict him treating social standards of what is honorable and base as trivial matters of propriety that may be violated whenever it is to your advantage, doing demeaning and shocking things like donning women’s robes at the king’s command, or exposing his child to die. When reproached for treating his child as if it were not his own offspring, Aristippus replied that we also beget phlegm and vermin and

cast them away as useless. These stories are mostly malicious slander, but even such ‘just so’ stories are composed after the fact to provide amusing and unfair illustrations of the positions they slander.

Alone among ancient Greek ethicists, the Cyrenaics clearly reject eudaimonism, the thesis that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the highest good. Even Epicurus does not go this far: he combined hedonism and eudaimonism by asserting that we wish for our lives as a whole to be pleasant, and this state is happiness. But the Cyrenaics deny that we value happiness for its own sake. Happiness is nothing more than a sum of particular pleasures, and while we value the particular pleasures for their own sakes, happiness is valued only for the sake of the particular pleasures that compose it. (In saying this, they probably do not mean that happiness is valued as an instrumental means for obtaining its constituent pleasures, but that we do not value obtaining happiness as such, but only insofar as we value its constituents.)

Furthermore, they also assert that we should *not* strive to accumulate the particular pleasures that produce happiness. That would involve worrying about the fact that certain things that lead to pleasure are themselves painful, and vice-versa, and doing so would be most disagreeable. Aristippus, it is reported, declares that the future is “nothing to him.”

Heedlessly concentrating on attaining pleasures close at hand seems like a good strategy for attaining a pain-filled life, and the exact reasons for the Cyrenaics’ rejection of eudaimonism and future-concern are disputed. Suggestions include: (a) The Cyrenaics hold that best strategy for attaining happiness (and thus maximizing particular pleasures) is simply to concentrate on the present and not worry about long-term consequences. (b) The Cyrenaics deny that there is an extended ‘self’ that exists throughout one’s life to be the subject of happiness, and so one should strive to obtain pleasure for one’s fleeting ‘present self.’ (c) The Cyrenaics deny that one’s life as a whole has any overall good or goal (such as happiness). Instead, each desire has its own good, which is the particular pleasure it aims at. One should strive to fulfill whatever desires one has at that time.

However, the Cyrenaics also recommend anticipating future evils in order to mitigate or eliminate the distress they cause when they arrive, and Aristippus advocates gaining education and cultivating sociability; all of these seem to show some concern for the future. On this basis, it has been suggested that the Cyrenaics are not literally putting forward as an ethical doctrine that the future simply does not matter. Instead, they are just recommending that, as a general rule of thumb, it is better not to worry much about the future and to “live in the moment.”

Several later Cyrenaic philosophers modified mainstream Cyrenaic ethics.

Hegesias asserts that gratitude, friendship, and beneficence do not exist, because these things are not chosen for their own sake, but for the sake of their usefulness. The mainstream Cyrenaics would agree that these things are valued merely for the sake of one’s own pleasure, but deny that in order to be genuine, gratitude, friendship and beneficence must be valued for their own sakes. Hegesias also holds that happiness is impossible to achieve, because the body and mind are subject to so much suffering. The wise person surpasses others not so much in his ability to achieve pleasure, but to avoid pain. Hegesias was (supposedly) called the ‘death-persuader’ and forbidden from lecturing because his audience members would often kill themselves after listening to him.

Anniceris softens the Cyrenaics’ psychological egoism. He denies that we value our

friend only for his usefulness; the wise person will continue to care for his friend and endure pains on his behalf out of good will and love. This good will also underlies gratitude, honor for one's parents, and patriotic actions on behalf of one's fatherland. These things allow the wise person to remain happy, even if he has few other pleasures in life. Despite this, Anniceris says—perhaps inconsistently—that my friend's pleasure is not intrinsically choiceworthy, because I cannot experience his pleasure, only my own.

Finally, Theodorus, a pupil of Anniceris, denies that bodily pleasures and pains are intrinsically good or bad. Instead, only the mental pleasure of joy is intrinsically good, and only the mental pain of distress is intrinsically bad. He also notoriously claims that the wise person will rob temples and commit adultery under the right circumstances.

SEE ALSO: ANCIENT ETHICS, EGOISM, HEDONISM, PLEASURE

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

Annas, Julia, 1993. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An excellent and influential systematic exposition of ancient ethical theorists from Aristotle on. Only deals with the Cyrenaics in passing, but does a nice job of highlighting the respects in which the Cyrenaics are out of step with other ancient ethical theorists.

Diogenes Laertius (D. Hicks, trans.) 1925. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library).

Book II is our major (though not only) source on the Cyrenaics.

Lampe, Kurt. 2014. *The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The only recent book in English to give a comprehensive overview of the ethics of the Cyrenaics, including the later Cyrenaics. Stresses the way in which Cyrenaicism can be a viable and attractive “way of life,” and thus depicts the Cyrenaics as less out of step with mainstream Greek ethics than do scholars like Annas. Thorough, clear, and engaging.

O’Keefe, Tim 2002. “The Cyrenaics on Pleasure, Happiness, and Future-Concern,” *Phronesis*, vol. 47, pp. 395-416.

Explores the question of why the Cyrenaics claim that happiness is not the highest good, but particular pleasures are instead, and that one should not worry about the long-term consequences of one's actions but instead concentrate on obtaining pleasures near at hand.

O’Keefe, Tim. 2017. “The Annicerean Cyrenaics on Friendship and Habitual Good Will.” *Phronesis*, vol. 62, pp. 305-318.

Tries to resolve an apparent contradiction in the ethics of the Annicereans, who claim both that the wise person cares for her friend and endures pains for him because of her

goodwill and love, and that your own pleasure is the end of life and that a friend's happiness isn't intrinsically choiceworthy.

Tsoula, Voula 1998. *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Although a bit dense, and dealing with the Cyrenaics' theory of knowledge instead of their ethics, a groundbreaking study that will be of use for those who wish to explore the connection between the epistemology and ethics of the Cyrenaics.

Tsoula-McKirahan, Voula 1994. "The Socratic Origins of the Cynics and Cyrenaics," in Paul A. Vander Waerdt (ed.), *The Socratic Movement*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 367-91.

Explores how a hedonist like Aristippus the Elder (whose views are arguably far different than the full-blown Cyrenaic theory) could plausibly claim to be an heir of Socrates.