



Updating Epicurus's Concept of *Katastematic* Pleasure

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Though linked to the pleasures of food and drink, Epicurus was no ordinary hedonist. Perhaps, like more contemporary critics, Epicurus thought sensual pleasures more befitting swine than human beings. Despite that, Epicurus was indeed a hedonist; like the sensualists, Epicurus endorsed the central hedonistic claim that pleasure is the Good. But can commitment to the central hedonistic claim really avoid turning into sensualism?

Epicurus certainly hoped so. To retain the central hedonistic insight, and yet avoid sensualism, he developed a novel account of pleasure to become the cornerstone of a new hedonism. He called the new variety of pleasure *katastematic* pleasure. Philosophers sympathetic with the idea of a viable hedonistic alternative to sensualism require a plausible account of something akin to *katastematic* pleasure. But because current accounts of the notion are implausible, we need an updated version to do the job.

1. *Katastematic* Pleasure: Some Flawed Accounts

Epicurean hedonism may be differentiated from sensualist varieties of hedonism by distinguishing two kinds of pleasure. As noted by Diogenes, Epicurus endorses a distinction between kinetic and *katastematic* pleasure:

[Epicurus] disagrees with the Cyrenaics on the question of pleasure. For they do not admit *katastematic* pleasure, but only kinetic pleasure, and he admits both types in both the body and the soul. . . . And Epicurus, in his *On Choices*, says this: "For freedom from disturbance and freedom from suffering are *katastematic* pleasures; and joy and delight are viewed as kinetic and active."¹

There are also passages in which Epicurus claims that *katastematic* pleasure is the more important of the two kinds. He seems to imply this, for example, in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind.²

Relying on passages like these, many commentators from ancient times to the present reasonably attribute to Epicurus the view that *katastematic* pleasure is simply the absence of pain. In *De Finibus*, Cicero explicitly endorses this interpretation: “Epicurus holds the highest pleasure to be to feel no pain.”³ David Sedley and Anthony Long propose a similar interpretation in their excellent anthology of Hellenistic philosophy. On their view, the complete absence of pain “constitutes” the greatest pleasure.⁴ Sedley and Long, like Cicero, endorse an equivalence between freedom from pain and *katastematic* pleasure: “as long as pain is absent we have [*katastematic*] pleasure.”⁵

The account of *katastematic* pleasure, based on the comments of Cicero and Sedley and Long, is so widespread that it deserves to be called the standard interpretation. The thesis is that agents enjoy *katastematic* pleasure just in case they are free of pain. The standard interpretation may not be mistaken as an interpretation. Indeed, it probably captures exactly what the historical Epicurus had in mind. The trouble with it is that as an account of a non-sensualistic variety of pleasure, it is pretty clearly unacceptable. Accordingly, it cannot serve as the backbone for a viable non-sensualistic hedonism. One problem is that it conflicts with the Platonic thesis that there exists a “neutral state” between pleasure and pain, a state in which someone experiences neither pleasure nor pain.⁶ The standard interpretation implies that there is no such neutral state; if a person is free of pain, then it follows from the standard interpretation that he is enjoying pleasure. This implication seems wrong.

Consider someone in a dreamless and painless sleep. According to the standard interpretation, the person is enjoying pleasure throughout the duration of his sleep. But surely such a person is not enjoying constant pleasure. It seems wrong to insist that a dreamless and painless sleep is anything more or less than completely neutral.

A more serious problem is pointed out by the Cyrenaics. If *katastematic* pleasure is merely the absence of pain, then being comatose or dead are pleasant states, since these are states completely free of pain.⁷ But of course being comatose or dead are not pleasant states. Thus, *katastematic* pleasure is not merely the absence of pain.

Perhaps the standard interpreters focus too narrowly on a few select passages, and fail to take into consideration other strands of Epicurus’s thought. In addition to his views on pleasure and the fear of death, Epicurus developed an atomic theory and an interesting theory of desire. Perhaps commentators who explicate the concept of *katastematic* pleasure with specific reference to these other parts of his philosophy will fare better.

J. M. Rist is careful to explain his interpretation in terms of Epicurus's atomic theory.⁸ The result is a view that, at first glance, seems different from the standard interpretation. One of Rist's important theses is that *katastematic* pleasure is not to be understood as a static atomic state. All pleasures involve the movement of atoms.⁹ *Katastematic* pleasure, he thinks, is best understood as "the pleasure deriving from a well-balanced and steady state of the moving atoms in a sensitive organ."¹⁰ The challenging part of this formulation is to explain what a well-balanced and steady state is.

One way to spell it out is to recognize that Rist's formulation allows for the possibility of local *katastematic* pleasure. The entire body need not be in a well-balanced and steady state in order to experience *katastematic* pleasure. When some part of the body, some sensitive organ, is in a steady state, that part experiences *katastematic* pleasure even if the rest of the body remains in pain.

This implication provides Rist with a way to explain what, for Epicurus, is the "greatest pleasure" or "absolute tranquillity."¹¹ It would be a condition in which every sensitive organ is in a well-balanced and steady state. But, again, what is a well-balanced and steady state? For Rist the answer is: "The existence of [the greatest pleasure], if the Epicurean view is explained in terms of their atomic theory, means that the person enjoying it experiences no rough movements among the atoms composing his organs of sensation and mental perception."¹² The suggestion is that a well-balanced and steady state is a state in which there are no rough movements among its atoms. But what are rough movements? According to Rist, who follows Lucretius, atomic movements are associated with either pleasure or pain, and the rough ones are the ones associated with pain. Thus, Rist's suggestion, that the greatest pleasure results when a person is experiencing no rough movements, amounts to saying that people experience the greatest pleasure whenever they are completely free of pain. In the end, therefore, Rist's suggestion simply is that *katastematic* pleasure is freedom from pain.

This interpretation of his view would probably come as no surprise to Rist. In several places he takes absence of pain to be equivalent to *katastematic* pleasure.¹³ In one passage, he redescribes "the greatest pleasure" in terms of pain rather than rough movements: "The suggestion seems to be that the greatest pleasure is the pleasure of a sentient object none of whose parts feels any pain."¹⁴ Rist's view, then, though explicated in terms of Epicurus's atomic theory, results in an account of *katastematic* pleasure nearly identical to the standard interpretation. Hence, his view is susceptible to the same counterexamples.

Perhaps Phillip Mitsis's account avoids the counterexamples.¹⁵ His account is explained in terms of satisfying desires: "Epicurus distinguishes two varieties of pleasure: the kinetic pleasures of motion (satisfying a desire) and the *katastematic* pleasures of stability (having satisfied a desire)."¹⁶ Mitsis's complete account is rich and subtle, but the basic idea seems to be this. People

have desires. When their desires go unsatisfied, people suffer discomfort and, eventually, pain. While in the process of satisfying the desire, as in eating to satisfy hunger, kinetic pleasure is often enjoyed. Finally, when the pain that results from unsatisfied desire has been completely removed, people achieve a state of *katastematic* balance; they enjoy *katastematic* pleasure. Thus, Mitsis's interpretation implies that people enjoy *katastematic* pleasure whenever they are free of the pain associated with unsatisfied desire.

Mitsis's account suffers what is by now a familiar problem. When someone is in a coma, for example, he presumably has no pain associated with unsatisfied desires. He is certainly in a state of stability. Mitsis's view implies that such a state is *katastematically* pleasant. That seems wrong. As with the standard interpretation and Rist's view, the absence of pain, on Mitsis's account, seems to be sufficient for *katastematic* pleasure. Without adding something positive to the negative condition of being in a state of balance, Mitsis's account falls victim to the very same simple counterexamples.

Fortunately, an account of *katastematic* pleasure need not be as misguided as these accounts suggest. Though one of them may indeed capture what Epicurus explicitly says about *katastematic* pleasure, an updated version of the concept can be constructed that avoids many of their difficulties.

2. An Updated Account

Something else must be added to the absence of pain in order for it to yield pleasure. The missing element is suggested by Epicurus himself in *Principal Doctrine* 18:

The pleasure in the flesh does not increase when once the pain of need has been removed, but it is only varied. And the limit of pleasure in the mind is produced by rationalizing those very things and their congeners which used to present the mind with its greatest fears.¹⁷

The missing element is the rationalizing here mentioned. In addition to the mere absence of pain, the absence of pain must be recognized and appreciated. One plausible way to explain this is by utilizing the notion of an important propositional attitude, described here by Fred Feldman:

This is the attitude we indicate when we say that someone takes pleasure in or is pleased about some state of affairs. Although I cannot define this attitude, I can say a few words about it. I think that when we take pleasure in a state of affairs, we welcome it in a certain way; we are glad that it is happening; we like it in a certain familiar way. In typical cases, if we take pleasure in some state of affairs, we may want it to continue, although this

is not universally true. I call this attitude “propositional pleasure” since it is a propositional attitude.¹⁸

Propositional pleasure is a familiar enough notion. Many of us experience it often. Some person might, for example, take pleasure in the fact that the Yankees won the World Series. Such a person is glad that that particular state of affairs occurred. It pleases him in some degree.

With respect to *katastematic* pleasure, the relevant state of affairs is the absence of pain. Feldman suggests that people enjoy *katastematic* pleasure whenever they take pleasure in the fact that they themselves are not suffering pain. The mere absence of pain is not sufficient. The agent must also recognize that fact and take pleasure in it. The suggested account thus adds a positive element to the negative requirement.

The primary benefit of this view is that *katastematic* pleasure can no longer be said to be experienced when in a painless sleep or a deep coma. The reason is that such individuals, though they may be completely free of pain and disturbance, are obviously not taking pleasure in that fact. Thus, this updated account, taking advantage of notions such as propositional pleasure and states of affairs not clearly articulated in Epicurus's day, avoids the counterexamples directed at the previous accounts.

Still, this account is not the best we can do. For one thing, it seems too restrictive. Feldman thinks that *katastematic* pleasures cannot be enjoyed until all pains are removed. Only then can someone take pleasure in the fact that they are not feeling pain or disturbance. But *katastematic* pleasures should be slightly easier to come by than that. Consider, for example, a man who through most of his life suffers terrible pain in both the mind and body. After enrolling in the Garden of Epicurus, he gradually begins to alleviate his suffering. At some point, all but a tiny bit of pain is relieved. It seems reasonable to suppose that the man could take a lot of pleasure in the fact that he no longer feels all of the pain he used to feel. In addition, it seems plausible to suggest that the pleasure is *katastematic* in nature. After all, he is not taking pleasure in the fact that some particular sensation is being experienced. He is taking pleasure in the fact that numerous pains are no longer present.

To take another example, consider a man who throughout his life is plagued by the tiniest painful twinge of a headache. It seems overly restrictive to suggest that this man is forever incapable of enjoying *katastematic* pleasure. It seems preferable to suppose that he experiences *katastematic* pleasure when he takes pleasure in the fact that he no longer feels a certain pain he used to have in his foot – even while he laments, to some degree, the painful twinge in his head. An agent need not be completely free of pain, then, to enjoy *katastematic* pleasures.

A modified account of *katastematic* pleasure allows for this. Subjects enjoy *katastematic* pleasure just in case they take pleasure in the fact that they

themselves are not feeling some particular pain in the body or disturbance in the soul. This revision admits local *katastematic* pleasures. The sad man who, for the most part, lives an excruciating life could enjoy *katastematic* pleasure by taking pleasure in the fact that he no longer feels many of the particular pains he used to feel; and the man forever plagued by the little headache could enjoy *katastematic* pleasure by taking pleasure in the fact that he no longer feels that particular pain in his foot.

Peter Preuss has suggested, however, that local *katastematic* pleasures are implausible.¹⁹ His concern, however, seems to be limited to commentators who suggest that local *katastematic* pleasures are nothing more than the mere absence of pain. “Then,” he writes, “the obvious problem is that I am not aware of this pleasure all the time, for example when writing philosophy or playing tennis.”²⁰ The idea seems to be this. Consider the man who still suffers the tiny headache but has recently been spared a painful foot. It seems implausible, Preuss suggests, to suppose that he experiences any pleasure with respect to his pain-free foot when, for example, he is participating in a game of tennis. After all, since his attention is directed elsewhere, he is not aware of the fact that his foot is pain free.

Preuss’s point is well-taken, but it poses no problem for the modified account of *katastematic* pleasure. The critical positive element is that an individual takes pleasure in the fact that he is no longer feeling some particular pain at that time; it is not merely that he no longer has the pain that constitutes the pleasure. During the time the man is playing tennis, it seems reasonable to suppose that he is not taking pleasure in the fact that his foot is free of pain. The new account thus provides an account of local *katastematic* pleasure, perhaps, that Preuss would not find objectionable.

Another reason to welcome the possibility of local *katastematic* pleasure is that it provides an easy way to explain what, for Epicurus, would be the greatest pleasure. According to the modified account, an agent enjoys *katastematic* pleasure when he takes pleasure in the fact that he does not feel some particular pain. The greatest pleasure, or, as Epicurus might put it, the limit of pleasure, would be achieved when an agent takes pleasure in the fact that all particular pains are absent. Thus, the new account not only avoids the counterexamples that cripple other views, but also explains what would be the limit of pleasure.

In addition to this benefit, the updated account is amenable to another, rather neglected element of *katastematic* pleasure. Consider *Principal Doctrine* 18 again. Epicurus is careful to point out the fact that the greatest mental pleasures are derived from, “rationalizing those very things and their congeners which used to present the mind with its greatest fears.”²¹ This comment might be taken seriously. What Epicurus might be suggesting is that a subject cannot take pleasure, for example, in the fact that he no longer feels the pains of torture unless he himself has previously experienced the pains of torture.

This addition suggests yet another modification. Subjects enjoy *katastematic* pleasure just in case they take pleasure in the fact that they themselves are not feeling pains or disturbance previously experienced. The new addition is a plausible and extremely interesting one. But it is plausible only if the crucial phrase "previously experienced" is understood in a certain way. It might mean that a particular pain has to be actually felt by the agent. If this were the correct reading, then the new account would suggest the following: if Keith has never actually felt the pains, say, of a lover's broken heart, he would be incapable of taking pleasure in the fact that he does not now feel such pains. This would be a narrow reading of "previously experienced," and it would make the new account implausible. Indeed, it seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that Keith could take pleasure in the fact that he does not, at the present time, suffer the pains of a broken heart whatever they may be like.

This suggests endorsing a wide reading of "previously experienced." In order to say that Keith has previously experienced a particular pain, it need not be the case that he has actually experienced them; it is enough that he has experienced them in a less direct way. We can make a distinction, then, between *direct* and *indirect* experience. Since Keith has never had a broken heart, he has never actually felt its pains; he has never directly experienced them. Still, Keith has experienced them indirectly. He has seen, for example, the torment that abandoned friends have felt. He has seen how unrequited love affects the sufferers ability to perform at work and concentrate on philosophy. Since he knows what such painful reactions normally coincide with, and what such limitations normally involve, he has, in this indirect yet real sense, experienced the pains of a broken heart. He has surely seen enough to know that he would be better off if he never had to suffer from one. Thus, when the updated account suggests that pain must be previously experienced, "previously experienced" is to be read in this wide sense.

If understood in this way, the modified account opens up the possibility for a great range of *katastematic* pleasure resulting from the absence of pain. *Katastematic* pleasures need not be restricted to banal things like the freedom from hunger pangs. Instead, it should allow human beings to take pleasure in the fact that they are free of all sorts of emotional and psychic pain. The updated account provides just that. Though you may have never felt the pains of a lover's broken heart, you can take extreme pleasure in the fact that you are not now suffering from one. Though you may have never had to suffer from the pain associated with claustrophobia or schizophrenia, you can, and should, be pleased that you do not now suffer from such pains. It is a key benefit of the updated account that it easily accounts for this wide range of *katastematic* pleasure.

The new addition, that pain has to be previously experienced, still has the consequence that Keith could not take pleasure in the fact that he is not feeling the pains of a broken heart, if he has never experienced the pains of a broken

heart. But this consequence is not implausible. How could anyone take pleasure in something they have never experienced in any way whatsoever? It seems conceptually impossible.

An objector may persist. If we take “previously experienced” in this wide sense, it seems as though the additional clause adds nothing of substance. The fact that a particular pain has to be previously experienced seems empty and trivial because nearly everything has been experienced in that sense. One reason to resist this objection is that the “previously experienced” clause seems to require a certain amount of conceptual capacity for it to be met, especially with regard to indirect experiences. Indirect experiences require the ability to recognize pain symptoms and pain’s unwelcome consequences. They require that the person be able to successfully link the pain symptoms and consequences to, for example, the presence of broken heart. If the conceptual capacities of the individual do not successfully allow that link, then that particular *katastematic* pleasure cannot be had because it has not been previously experienced. Infants, for example, though they may indeed take pleasure in the fact that they no longer feel a pain directly experienced, may lack the capability to take pleasure in the fact that they do not feel the pains of a broken heart. This implication seems plausible.

In addition, the clause requiring that a particular pain be previously experienced, even when the clause is broadly construed, hints at an additional point of emphasis not made explicit by previous accounts: the intensity of *katastematic* pleasure. It seems proper to suppose that *katastematic* pleasure would be more intense if the particular pain that is absent were directly experienced as opposed to merely indirectly experienced. The person who actually suffered the pains of a broken heart would be in a position to take a more intense pleasure in the fact that he does not feel that pain than would the person whose only experience with broken hearts is indirect.

Consider another example to illustrate this point. Think of a man who lived as a prisoner of war for many years before being rescued. Clearly the man, once rescued, will often take pleasure in the fact that he does not feel the particular pains he used to feel every day. Just as clearly, we can sometimes take pleasure in the fact that we do not feel those particular pains, even though we have no direct experience with being a prisoner of war. It seems reasonable to suppose that the man who directly experienced the pains would take more intense *katastematic* pleasure in the fact that the pains are absent, than would any other person without sufficiently similar direct experience; *a fortiori* for merely indirect experience. Perhaps anomalous cases could be constructed. But, other things being equal, the person who directly experiences a pain would take more pleasure in the fact that he no longer feels it. The updated account suggests this important and interesting feature.

Finally, let us return to the notion of the limit of pleasure. The new account provides an easy way to explain it. The limit of someone’s *katastematic* pleas-

ure, the greatest pleasure possible for a person, would occur when the person takes pleasure in the fact that he is completely free from pain. Interestingly, the updated account also allows the possibility of different limits. For example, if you have lived a relatively pain-free life, then your limit for *katastematic* pleasure would be considerably less than the one for an individual who suffered the torments of a prisoner of war camp. Since his pain has been greater, so, too, is the limit of his *katastematic* pleasure. This seems right. If there is any justice in the world, then someone who has experienced the greatest amount of pain ought to be in a position to enjoy the greatest amount of pleasure. The updated account of *katastematic* pleasure suggests that justice may exist.

3. Conclusion

The standard account of Epicurus's concept of *katastematic* pleasure is inadequate because it is refuted by a few simple counterexamples. An updated understanding of the concept is not so easily refuted. The account suggested not only avoids the counterexamples, but makes explicit a number of interesting features of *katastematic* pleasure that are at least implicitly suggested by some of Epicurus's comments. The result is a considerably more interesting and defensible understanding of *katastematic* pleasure.

Admittedly, because it makes use of some notions not clearly articulated in Epicurus's time, the updated account cannot be found explicitly in Epicurean texts. Despite that, however, the updated account maintains the spirit of Epicurus's insight. Epicurus wanted a viable hedonistic alternative to sensualism. His idea was to develop a novel conception of pleasure, one in which pleasure was the result of being pain-free. The updated account maintains this central Epicurean insight. As it must, freedom from pain plays an absolutely essential role. It is just that absence from pain is not, alone, sufficient for *katastematic* pleasure. Thus, anyone sympathetic with the spirit of the Epicurean alternative to sensualist varieties of hedonism will finally have an updated, and more defensible, account of *katastematic* pleasure to work with.²²

Notes

1. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), p. 35.
2. *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, ed. and trans. Cyril Bailey (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970), p. 89.
3. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Finibus bonorum et malorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), §1.39.

4. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. I, p. 122.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
6. See Plato, *Philebus*, trans. J. C. B. Gosling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), §§43A–44B.
7. See Inwood and Gerson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
8. J. M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
9. Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
10. *Ibid.* See also Phillip Mitsis, *Epicurus's Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 46 n. 92.
11. See Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
12. Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
13. See pp. 106, 109 & 125.
14. Rist, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
15. Mitsis, *op. cit.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
17. Long and Sedley, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
18. Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasure," *Ethics* (April 1997).
19. Peter Preuss, *Epicurean Ethics: Katastematic Hedonism* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), pp. 152–153.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Long and Sedley, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
22. I wish to thank Fred Feldman, Gareth Matthews, John Robison, Jean-Paul Vessel, and an anonymous reviewer and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Value Inquiry*.