

Martínez, Javier; Labiano, Mikel

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Epicurus and the paradox of hedonism

Javier Martínez & Mikel Labiano

(University of Oviedo; University of Valencia)

Abstract

The paradox of hedonism is arguably one of the most powerful anti-hedonist arguments. This argument tells us that, because it is self-defeating and irrational to single-mindedly pursue pleasure, pleasure cannot represent the only thing that directly makes us better off. We intend to show in this paper that some of the main elements in Epicurus' ethical position enable him to avoid the negative conclusion of this paradox. We also argue that central claims of the Cyrenaics' hedonism – specifically that only the experience of present pleasure has intrinsic value, and that we should pursue whatever brings pleasure now – make their ethical position especially vulnerable to this paradox. In conclusion, we argue that the fact that Epicurus can, while the Cyrenaics cannot, cope with the paradox of hedonism clearly represents a favorable characteristic of his ethical position.

Keywords

Epicurus; the Cyrenaics; ethical hedonism; the paradox of hedonism; presentism; katastematic pleasures

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1. Introduction

Ethical hedonism, in the broad sense, can be described as the philosophical view according to which pleasure (*hēdonē* [ἡδονή]) is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable (see Weijers 2012: chapter 1).¹ That is to say, ethical hedonists think that pleasure is the only thing valuable for its own sake. As such, all other things have only instrumental value – i.e. they are valuable, but only because they can bring about pleasure. Unfortunately, the agreement between advocates of ethical hedonism typically does not go beyond this general definition. This brings us to a number of puzzling questions. Do all pleasures have the same value? Are carnal pleasures equally beneficial as intellectual pleasures? What can we say about the nature of our pleasures and pains? Similarly, what is the most appropriate way to fulfil our desires? More specifically, should we strive to eliminate most of our desires or, in contrast, attempt to satisfy them all? Finally, should we postpone our present pleasures for the sake of obtaining greater pleasures in the future, or should we strive to maximize present pleasures without being concerned about the future? All these questions are a matter of very serious disputes among hedonists. This point becomes especially clear when we compare Epicurus' version of hedonism with the version of hedonism advocated by the Cyrenaics. The main aim of this paper is to examine, as thoroughly as possible, how Epicurus and the Cyrenaics answer these questions. This examination will, we hope, enable us to determine which of these two positions provide us with the more plausible justification of ethical hedonism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the first section, we will examine some of the most important points of divergence between the versions of hedonism advocated by Epicurus and the Cyrenaics. After we clarify the main differences between these two hedonist positions, we will consider a powerful anti-hedonist argument – the so-called 'paradox of hedonism'. This argument starts from the assumption that it is self-defeating and irrational to single-mindedly pursue pleasure, and that, because of this, pleasure *cannot* represent the only thing that directly makes us better off. Given that there are persuasive reasons to accept this assumption, the intended conclusion of this paradox is that hedonism must be false. We hope to show that Epicurus' theory of katastematic pleasures, as well as his distinction between different kinds of desires, enables him to easily and elegantly avoid the negative conclusion of the paradox of hedonism. We also hope to show that central claims of the Cyrenaics' hedonism – specifically, that only the experience of present pleasure has intrinsic value, and that we should pursue whatever brings pleasure now – make their ethical position completely unable to deal with this paradox. Based on this result, we intend to defend the conclusion according to which the fact that Epicurus can, while the Cyrenaics cannot, successfully deal with this paradox clearly represents a favorable characteristic of his ethical position.

1 About the Epicurean classification of pleasures, which "confronts us with a number of problems and contradictions", see Nikolsky (2001).

2. The main characteristics of Epicurean and the Cyrenaic hedonism

According to the predominant opinion, Epicurus most likely developed his moderate or ascetic version of ethical hedonism in order to avoid some of the problems raised by the crude and sensual Cyrenaic hedonism (O’Keefe 2010: p. 118).² In order to make the difference between these two hedonist positions a bit clearer, let us first briefly consider some of the central distinctive features of Epicurus’ hedonism. As is well-known, Epicurus endorses the view that mental pleasures are preferable to bodily pleasures, and that mental pains are greater than bodily pains. Epicurus thinks that this is the case due to the fact that bodily pleasures and pains concern only the present, whereas mental pleasures and pains also encompass the past and the future. Thus, for instance, he thinks that our memories of past painful experiences can themselves be painful, just as our memories of pleasurable experiences can themselves be pleasurable. In a similar way, anticipation of some future event can be painful or pleasurable. Now, whether these mental experiences will ultimately turn out to be painful or pleasurable, depends mainly on how we expect our future to go.³

In addition, Epicurus distinguishes between the so-called *kinetic* pleasures (i.e. ‘pleasures in motion’; *hedonai kata kinesis* [ἡδοναὶ κατὰ κίνησιν])⁴ and *katastematic* pleasures (i.e. ‘static’ pleasures; *hedonai katastematikai* [ἡδοναὶ καταστηματικά]).⁵ Kinetic pleasures are typically thought to accompany the process of satisfying one’s desires, whereas, on Epicurus’ account, the state of not being in pain or need – i.e. the state of having one’s desires satisfied – is *not* conceived of as affectively neutral state; rather, it is another type of pleasure – a katastematic pleasure (see Nikolsky 2001: p. 441). It is important to bear in mind that katastematic pleasures play an important role in Epicurus’ hedonism. In fact, Epicurus even claims that the happiest person is a person who has achieved the highest level of painlessness (*aponia* [ἀπονία]), as the katastematic pleasure of the body, and tranquility or undisturbedness (*ataraxia* [ἀταραξία]), as the katastematic pleasure of the soul (*DL* 10.136). In this sense, Epicurus says that these two kinds of katastematic pleasure represent the ultimate end (*telos* [τέλος]) of every rational human action.⁶

2 It is widely conceded that Epicurus also endorses psychological hedonism – i.e. the view according to which pleasure is the goal of all human action (O’Keefe 2010: p. 113). Or “in other words, we are motivated only by conscious or unconscious desires to experience pleasure or avoid pain. Ethical hedonism holds that only pleasure has value and only pain has disvalue” (Buscicchi 2022). For a very interesting and illuminating discussion on whether Epicurus was, in fact, a psychological hedonist, see Cooper (1998) and Woolf (2004).

3 For more details about this Epicurean view, see O’Keefe (2010: p. 118).

4 Epicurus is following the Cyrenaics in calling these pleasures kinetic (see Purinton 1993: p. 281).

5 There are authors, like Gosling & Taylor (1982), who argue that Epicurus does not sharply distinguish between kinetic and katastematic pleasures. However, given that such views are still considered to be highly controversial, in this paper we will grant that Epicurus clearly distinguishes between kinetic and katastematic pleasures.

6 Note, however, that this claim is far from being unproblematic. Jeffrey Purinton, for instance, thinks that it is not clear at all whether Epicurus’s claim that katastematic pleasure of painlessness and undisturbedness can be conceived of as the *telos* (for more details, see Purinton 1993).

When it comes to how pleasures are related to pains, Epicurus famously endorses the view, according to which there are no intermediate states between pleasure and pain. What this view essentially amounts to is that Epicurus identifies all kinds of pleasure – that is, both kinetic and katastematic pleasures – with the absence of pain (see Striker 1993). In the modern literature, this view about the relation between pain and pleasure is referred to as *Epicurean symmetry* (see Shriver 2014). Now, before we assess the plausibility of Epicurean symmetry, note that there are two direct consequences of this view:

- i. If there are no intermediate states between pleasure and pain, and if pleasure is the absence of pain, then it would be impossible for us to simultaneously experience pleasure and pain.⁷
- ii. If pleasure is nothing more than the absence of pain, it follows that by decreasing the amount of pain, we automatically increase the amount of pleasure, and vice versa.

It should be observed, however, that the results of recent neurophysiological research provide us with the persuasive evidence to conclude that Epicurean symmetry represents a false view about the nature of the relation between our pleasures and pains. Namely, based on the fact that different brain regions are involved in our experience of pleasure and pain, we may justifiably say that they not only represent different types of experiences, but that they also contribute to our well-being in a completely different manner.⁸

Finally, note that despite the fact that Epicurus defends a version of ethical hedonism – according to which pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable – he insists that not all pleasures are equally choiceworthy. This characteristic of his ethical view stems from the fact that for Epicurus pleasure and pain are tied very closely to *desire-satisfaction*. More precisely, Epicurus thinks that pleasure comes from desire-satisfaction and pain from desire-frustration. As such, he posits two general strategies that one can pursue with respect to any given desire: one can either attempt to fulfil the desire, or try to eliminate it. As is reasonable to suppose, which of these two strategies will be ultimately applicable to a certain case, depends entirely on the nature of the particular desire. But, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, for the most part Epicurus readily advocates the second strategy. So, let us see in more details which desires Epicurus thinks we should fulfil and which he thinks we should eliminate. It is important to understand that he distinguishes between three main types of desires. First, there are natural and necessary desires. Such are, for instance, the desire for food, clothing, housing, and the like. We have these desires not as a result of learning and conditioning, but rather naturally. That is to say, we have these desires as a result of our natural constitution – as a matter of our physiology, we simply need food and hydration in order to survive and flourish,

7 It is often stressed that this claim contradicts Epicurus' distinction between kinetic and katastematic. Namely, it is argued that if Epicurus insists on his claim that it is impossible to simultaneously experience pleasure and pain, then this can only mean that there can be no kinetic pleasures. As Boris Nikolsky notes, "if a man is feeling pleasure while satisfying his hunger, then, apparently, at the same moment pleasure has to be accompanied by pain from hunger that has not yet been fully satisfied" (Nikolsky 2001: p. 442).

8 For useful discussions of Epicurean symmetry as well as surrounding issues, see Shriver (2014).

and we instinctively seek out for food and hydration. In this sense, it could be said that these desires are 'hard-wired' in human beings (see O'Keefe 2010: p. 124). Furthermore, Epicurus thinks that these desires are easy to fulfil and very difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate. Finally, note that these desires have a natural limit – if one is hungry, it only takes a limited amount of food to fill the stomach, after which the desire is satisfied. The second type of desires are natural but non-necessary desires. Although there are many desires that are natural to human beings, many of them are nevertheless *unnecessary* because, as Epicurus thinks, we can lead a perfectly happy life without satisfying them.⁹ A typical example of a natural and unnecessary desire would be the desire for extravagant or expensive food, as well as for many other luxurious goods that might be otherwise necessary for our survival and well-being. What this means is that, although we need food in order to thrive, we do not need any extravagant food, say, caviar, or meat. If such food is available, one does not have to refuse to eat it, but, as Epicurus insists, becoming dependent on such food would ultimately lead to unfulfilled desires and, consequently, to unhappiness. Epicurus, thus, concludes that these desires should be eliminated. Arguably, Epicurus' views on desires seems to be the principal reason why his hedonist position is often described as ascetic and moderate. This is clear in the following passage from his *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Plain foods lead to the same pleasure as an elaborate way of life, that is, when the pain due to physical need is removed. Barley bread and water provide the highest pleasure when they are taken to remove need. (*DL* 10.130–131)

Finally, the third type of desires, according to Epicurus, are vain and empty desires; such as desires for power, wealth, and fame.¹⁰ In contrast to natural and necessary desires, these desires have no natural limit and are, therefore, impossible to fulfil. For instance, think of someone's desire of wealth; no matter how much money one has, it is always possible to get more, and there seems to be no clear limit to how much wealth is enough. But, even more importantly, observe that these desires are not natural to human beings; rather, they are the result of false beliefs about what we need. In sum, we can see that vain and empty desires are the exact opposite of the natural and necessary desires in every respect. It thus comes as no surprise that, just like in the case of natural but unnecessary desires, Epicurus thinks that vain and empty desires should be eliminated. Now, given these considerations about the above three types of desires, Epicurus can say that the pleasure that comes from satisfaction of natural and necessary desires is overall better and more commendable than pleasure that comes from satisfaction of other two kinds of desires. As a result of this, Epicurus thinks that we should always carefully calculate the possible outcomes of our actions and choose that particular option that would be in our long-term interest:

9 Interestingly enough, Epicurus thinks that this is the case with our sexual desires – namely, he argues that it is possible to lead a perfectly happy life without satisfying our sexual desires (O'Keefe 2010: p. 184).

10 In contrast to the previous two types of desires, these desires are 'neither natural nor necessary' (see DeWitt 1954: p. 191).

[T]here are times when we pass by many pleasures – whenever something more harmful to us may emerge from that choice, and we agree to recognize many pains as better than pleasures, that is, when greater pleasure accrues to us from having endured pain over a long period. All pleasure is by its very nature suited to us and therefore good, but clearly not all pleasure is to be chosen; just so all pain is evil, yet not all pain which occurs is to be avoided. Choosing among these things is the result of measuring them and deliberating about their useful and wasteful aspects. (*DL* 10.129)

We can see that, although Epicurus insists that pleasures are good and pains are evil, it turns out that our choice between pleasures and pains is not straightforward (see e.g. O’Keefe 2010: p. 114). Indeed, some pleasures eventually lead to more pain and, on the other hand, we can significantly benefit from some pains. Although this may at first appear to be incompatible with the definition of ethical hedonism, it is not very hard to show that Epicurus was right about this. A doctor can significantly improve our health by a medical treatment that would cause us great distress. Also, although for some addicts taking drugs can be pleasurable, it is clear that such pleasures cannot be in their long-term interest. We think we can summarize the central claims of Epicurus’ hedonism as follows:

- (a) Mental pleasures are preferable to bodily pleasures.
- (b) There are both kinetic and katastematic pleasures.
- (c) There is no intermediate state between pleasure and pain.
- (d) Not all pleasures are equally choiceworthy and not all pains should be avoided.
- (e) We should always choose that particular option that would be in our long-term interest.

Let us now consider in more detail the main aspects of the Cyrenaic hedonism. It is important to bear in mind that the Cyrenaics take a diametrically opposed position with respect to each of the central claims of Epicurus’ ethical position. First, they think that bodily pleasures are preferable to mental pleasures – in fact, they even go as far as to argue that the main goal of one’s life is to pursue *bodily* pleasure (*DL* 2.87). The rationale behind this claim is that bodily pleasures are, in general, much more intense than mental pleasures. The Cyrenaics also decidedly reject the proposed Epicurean account of katastematic pleasures and recognize only one type of pleasure – that is, kinetic pleasure. As Diogenes Laertius reports, they raise the famous objection that for Epicurus the happiest person would be a corpse or somebody asleep (*DL* 2.88). To fully consider whether this objection is compelling or not is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper.¹¹ However, what most certainly lies within the scope of this paper is to somewhat

11 Tim O’Keefe notes that the Epicureans can successfully reply to this objection. Namely, Epicureans can argue that while it is true that corpses are free from pain and anxiety, there is a noticeable difference between being unconscious or dead, on the one hand, and being free from pain and anxiety, on the other. As O’Keefe rightfully observes, this difference results from the fact that corpses and unconscious people cannot take any delight in being free from pain and anxiety, while conscious people most certainly can (O’Keefe 2010: p. 121). See also Buscicchi (2022: 4b, 6).

clarify the theoretical background of this objection. In this sense, we think that once it becomes clear that in the Cyrenaic philosophical position the concept of *pathê* (sing. *pathos* [πάθος]; affection or experience), plays the crucial role, it is not very difficult to realize that for the Cyrenaics there can be no katastematic pleasures.¹² Namely, both pleasure and pain are *pathê*, and, according to the Cyrenaics, all *pathê* are associated with some kind of *movement* or *motion*. From this, it is thus clear that both pleasures and pains can only have *kinetic*, and not *katastematic*, nature.

Furthermore, the Cyrenaics reject Epicurean symmetry – i.e. the view that there is no intermediate state between pleasure and pain, and that by decreasing the amount of pain we automatically increase the amount of pleasure. In fact, they think that, along with the two main kinds of *pathê* that are of crucial relevance to ethical matters – i.e. *pathê* of pleasure and pain – there is also a third category of *pathê*; the so-called intermediates (see Tsouna 2004: p. 10). We have also seen that Epicurus endorses the claim that not all pleasures are to be chosen, just as not all pains are to be avoided. Indeed, it is one of the most striking characteristics of the Cyrenaic ethical position that they argue that *all* pleasure is intrinsically choiceworthy, even when it comes from the most indecent sources. That is to say, in contrast to Epicurus, they readily identify the good with pleasure, without distinguishing better from worse types of pleasure (*DL* 2.88). In their view, thus, one pleasure cannot be *qualitatively* superior to another. The positive side of such an approach lies in its evident simplicity – the only thing that matters is the quantity of pleasure that we get from an action. The obvious demerits of this approach, however, can be found in its counterintuitive consequences. Namely, we can and very often do question whether the pleasure is itself good or commendable by questioning its source – that is, by investigating whether the pleasure is obtained at someone else's expense. Yet, the Cyrenaics cannot account for such an investigation, for, in contrast to Epicurus, they think that pleasure that comes from the most indecent actions is as beneficial as pleasure that comes from kind and decent actions.

Finally, one of the central characteristics of the Cyrenaic ethics is that we should pursue whatever will bring us (bodily) pleasure *now*, rather than to postpone present pleasures for the sake of achieving better long-term consequences. Indeed, the Cyrenaics advocate pursuing whatever brings pleasure now, and enjoying that pleasure without being bothered about the possible future pains or discomfort. This view – often referred to as 'presentism' (see Lampe 2015: p. 64) – essentially tells us that "we should not forego present pleasures for the sake of obtaining greater pleasure in the future" (O'Keefe 2002: p. 395). Although there are many opposing accounts of what motivated the Cyrenaics to embrace presentism (see e.g. Irwin 1991, Annas 1993, Tsouna 2002),¹³ it seems reasonable to say that it stems, at least partially, from their belief that pleasure can occur only 'one temporal unit' (Zilioli 2012: p. 107),¹⁴ and that, consequently, pleasures and

12 For more details about the concept of *pathê* in the Cyrenaic philosophy, see Tsouna (2004: chapter 2).

13 Perhaps the most interesting attempt comes from Irwin (1991: p. 68), who believes that the Cyrenaics endorsed presentism, because they rejected the idea of a continuing self.

14 The Cyrenaics essentially believe that every affection has its own specific and limited temporal unit, and that any particular affection is relevant to us only within this temporal unit (Zilioli 2012: p. 108).

pains have ‘no prospective or retrospective value’ (Tsouna 2004: p. 16). As such, it seems they can easily avoid the objection that appeals to the psychological fact that we often feel pleasure when we mentally consider some prospect pleasurable event. Namely, the Cyrenaics can reply that such consideration of future pleasurable events can be valuable, but only because of the *present* pleasure that is caused by this consideration. The future pleasure *itself*, according to the Cyrenaics, has no value (see O’Keefe 2002: p. 404).

The Cyrenaic presentism plays an important part in yet another unusual trait of the Cyrenaic ethical position – namely, their *anti-eudaimonism*. One of the central theses of the Cyrenaic hedonism is that particular pleasure, and not happiness, represents the ultimate end of every rational human action. Arguably, this is the most obvious point of divergence between the Cyrenaics and almost all ancient ethicists, who embraced the so-called ‘eudaimonism’; that is to say, the view that happiness, and not particular pleasures, is the highest good and the ultimate end of every rational human action (see Vlastos 1984: p. 183). For reasons of simplicity and brevity, we think we can summarize the central claims of the Cyrenaic hedonism as follows:

- (a) Bodily pleasures are preferable to mental pleasures.
- (b) Both pleasures and pains can only have kinetic nature.
- (c) There are intermediate states, that are neither pleasurable nor painful.
- (d) Pleasures are intrinsically choiceworthy, even when they are obtained from the most indecent actions.
- (e) The memory of past pleasures and the anticipation of future pleasures have no value whatsoever.
- (f) We should pursue whatever will bring us (bodily) pleasure now, rather than to postpone present pleasures for the sake of achieving better long-term consequences.
- (g) Particular pleasure, and not happiness, is the ultimate end of every rational human action.

3. The paradox of hedonism

In the previous section, we have seen that for the Cyrenaics anticipation of future pleasures and memory of past pleasures are without value. But one may wonder whether the kind of hedonism that the Cyrenaics adopted can truly represent a coherent ethical position. In fact, it is often objected that to simultaneously claim that pleasure is our highest end and that, on the other hand, we should be completely unconcerned about whether our future selves will lead pleasurable lives is inconsistent. As O’Keefe remarks:

Why do they [the Cyrenaics] reject planning for the future...? This seems like a good strategy for leading an unpleasant life. (O’Keefe 2002: p. 396)

We think O’Keefe makes a very good point here. Indeed, it seems that, because the Cyrenaic version of hedonism essentially centres on the satisfaction of present pleasures, it *cannot* avoid the conclusion of one of the famous arguments against ethical hedonism

– that is, the ‘paradox of hedonism’. In its most straightforward version, the paradox of hedonism runs as follows:

- (1) Hedonists say that pleasure is the only thing that directly makes us better off.
- (2) If pleasure is the only thing that directly makes us better off, then it is rational to single-mindedly pursue it.
- (3) But, it is not rational to single-mindedly pursue pleasure.
- (4) Therefore, pleasure is not the only thing that directly makes us better off.

Evidently, there seems to be nothing wrong with the logic of this argument – the conclusion follows from the premises. However, we must also see if all the premises are true. To begin with, it is clear that premise (1) correctly expresses the central claim of ethical hedonism. Also, at least on first glance, it seems that premise (3) is pretty plausible. Namely, those who fixate on acquiring pleasure, are most certainly bound to be disappointed. This is understandable. In fact, there are numerous examples that show how aiming *directly* for pleasure can hardly be the best way to get it. It is, therefore, difficult not to agree with Henry Sidgwick, when he writes that it is the “fundamental paradox of Hedonism, that the impulse towards pleasure, if too predominant, defeats its own aim” (Sidgwick 1907: p. 48).¹⁵ So, at least for now, let us grant that premises (1) and (3) are true. This leaves us with premise (2). Now, before we can conclusively determine whether premise (2) is true or false, it is important to bear in mind that many philosophers find this premise deeply problematic, and it is not very difficult to see why. Namely, even if we grant that pleasure is intrinsically valuable, it does *not* follow that it is rational to single-mindedly pursue it. This is because the direct pursuit of good things sometimes prevents us from getting them. Russ Shafer-Landau expresses this point in the following passage:

Think of the professional golfer in the midst of a slump. She desperately wants to regain her swing. But the more she focuses of this, the harder it becomes. Or consider the immature student who wants more than anything to be well liked, and so tries, way too eagerly and very annoyingly, to be pals with his classmates. Such behavior is self-defeating. He would be much better off trying less hard. The bottom line is that even if pleasure is our greatest good, it may be irrational to aim for it directly. (Shafer-Landau 2010: p. 33)

This observation is correct, there is no doubt about it. But, given that this is so, many hedonists would happily conclude that the paradox cannot pose a legitimate threat to hedonism, for its premise (2) is to be rejected. However, in the context of determining whether the Epicurean and the Cyrenaic versions of ethical hedonism can successfully deal with this paradox, this would be too hasty a conclusion, since, based on everything we have seen so far, both of these versions of hedonism readily endorse premise (2). Thus, it seems that the most challenging task here is to determine how Epicurus and the Cyrenaics interpreted this premise, for what makes the paradox of hedonism so

15 J. S. Mill makes essentially the same point. See Mill (1969: pp. 85–86).

problematic is the specific *tension* between premises (2) and (3) (see Weijers 2012: pp. 65–66). It is the tension that the direct pursuit of pleasure, which stems from the central claim of ethical hedonism, leads to irrational and, therefore, unacceptable results. This tension can be avoided either by showing that ethical hedonism need not entail the direct pursuit of pleasure, or by showing that the direct pursuit of pleasure need not be irrational. Now, we need to see if it is possible to attribute any of these strategies to the hedonist positions of Epicurus and the Cyrenaics.

So, let us examine if the version of hedonism adopted by the Cyrenaics can avoid the tension between premises (2) and (3). First of all, it is clear that the Cyrenaics full-heartedly accept premise (2). In fact, for all that we can tell, they accept the most radical interpretation of this premise. Namely, not only do they think that it is rational for us to single-mindedly pursue pleasure, but, based on their claim that bodily pleasures are preferable to mental pleasure, their claim that pleasure is intrinsically choiceworthy even when it is obtained from the most indecent actions, as well as their claim that neither the memory of past enjoyments nor the expectation of future are of any importance, it follows that we should single-mindedly pursue whatever brings pleasure *now*, without being concerned about whether our actions are indecent or whether we should achieve better long-term consequences. Therefore, they accept the interpretation of premise (2) that most certainly makes premise (3) true. As such, it is clear that the Cyrenaics endorse the version of hedonism that cannot avoid the negative conclusion of the paradox of hedonism. Of course, this should come as no surprise, for we have already seen in the previous section that the Cyrenaic hedonism comprises many elements that are not only implausible and counterintuitive, but also give raise to an essentially incoherent ethical position (see e.g. O’Keefe 2002: p. 396).

But let us now see if Epicurus’ version of hedonism can successfully avoid the tension that plays the crucial role in the paradox of hedonism. Recall that premise (2) of the paradox says that if pleasure is the only thing that directly makes us better off, then it is rational to single-mindedly pursue it. Based on Epicurus’ distinction between different types of desires, it is clear that most of our desires should be eliminated, with the exception of our natural and necessary desires. So, it seems that, at least in the cases when the desire should be eliminated, the paradox of hedonism can be avoided entirely, for in such cases the pleasure is obtained not by directly aiming at it, but as a consequence of desire *elimination*. But it is also important to notice that Epicurus’ points about natural and necessary desires make us reconsider whether we should accept premise (3). Namely, it does not seem that it is irrational for us to directly pursue pleasure that results from the satisfaction of our natural and necessary desires, for these are desires that are necessary for our survival and flourishing. In fact, it would be much more plausible to say that someone who does not directly aims at satisfaction of these desires is acting irrationally. On the same grounds, there seems nothing irrational in a person’s direct pursuit of painlessness and tranquility. It is not clear at all why it would be irrational to directly pursue any of these two katastematic pleasures, and, for that matter, any other katastematic pleasure. Therefore, we think that Epicurus’ theory of katastematic pleasures and his account of desires allows him to successfully deal with the paradox of

hedonism – that is, he can avoid the conclusion of the paradox by accepting premise (2) and, instead, rejecting premise (3). The upshot is, then, that Epicurus' ascetic hedonism is not threatened at all by the paradox of hedonism.

4. Conclusion

We hope to have shown in this paper that Epicurus can, while the Cyrenaics cannot, successfully deal with the paradox of hedonism. Yet, this does not represent the only favourable characteristic of Epicurus' hedonism. Of course, we have seen that, based on results of recent neuroscientific studies, there are persuasive reasons to reject Epicurus' claim according to which there are no intermediate states between pleasure and pain, but this need not drastically affect the overall plausibility of Epicurus' position. The rejection of this claim does not alter any other positive characteristic of the central theoretical core of his hedonism. In addition, most of the claims that comprise his view on hedonism (e.g. the claim that not all pleasures are equally choiceworthy, the claim that we should always choose that particular option that would be in our long-term interest, etc.) are not only plausible in their own context, but also represent the claims that any other version of ethical hedonism has to incorporate. This, as we have seen, is evidently not the case with the central claims of the Cyrenaic hedonism. Based on all these considerations, we think we are entitled to conclude that Epicurus' position provides us with the more plausible justification of ethical hedonism than the position endorsed by the Cyrenaics.

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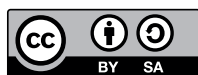
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Prof. Dr. Javier Martínez / martinez@uniovi.es

Department of Classical and Romance Philology
 Faculty of Philology, University of Oviedo
 Campus of "El Milán", 33011 Oviedo, Spain

Prof. Dr. Mikel Labiano / mikel.labiano@uv.es

Department of Classical Languages
 Faculty of Philology, University of Valencia
 Blasco Ibáñez 32, 46010 Valencia, Spain



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