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The Pleasures of Tranquillity

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Alex Voorhoeve, Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom. E-mail: a.e.voorhoeve@lse.ac.uk

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3240-3835>

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Abstract

Epicurus posited that the best life involves the greatest pleasures. He also argued that it involves attaining tranquillity. Many commentators, including Ken Binmore, have expressed scepticism that these two claims are compatible. For, they argue, Epicurus' tranquil life is so austere that it is hard to see how it could be maximally pleasurable. Here, I offer an Epicurean account of the pleasures of tranquillity. I also consider different ways of valuing lives from a hedonistic point of view. Benthamite hedonists value lives by the sum of pleasures minus the sum of pains, weighted by intensity and duration. Meanwhile, Binmore proposes that Epicurus valued lives by their worst episode. In contrast, I offer an Epicurean argument for why the best life is one in which a person attains tranquillity and tastes its pleasures until death.

Introduction

Epicurus claims that, considered by themselves, pleasures always have positive value and pains always have negative value. He also asserts that nothing can have positive intrinsic value unless it involves pleasurable experience and that nothing can have negative intrinsic value unless it involves pain. Finally, he holds that the best life is one that involves the greatest pleasure (*Letter to Menoeceus* [LM] in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-14 and p. 149; *Key Doctrines* [KD] 3, 4, 8, 10, 18, 25, and 30, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115). These ideas are common to many forms of hedonism. What sets Epicurus apart from many hedonists, however, is his idea that the greatest (in the sense of most valuable, or most choiceworthy) pleasures are generated in a state of *ataraxia*, or tranquillity. This is a condition in which a person is free from physical pain and mental distress. As Epicurus famously put it:

“The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures” (KD 3, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115).

“Refer every choice to the health of the body and the soul’s freedom from disturbance, since this is the end belonging to the blessed life. (...) So when we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time, but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For what produces the pleasant life is not continuous drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and other dishes of an expensive table, but sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion” (*LM* 131-2, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-14).

Many commentators have held that there is a tension between Epicurus’ hedonism and his claim that the best life is the tranquil life. For example, the Cyrenaics (members of a competing, sensualist school of hedonistic philosophy founded by Aristippus of Cyrene in the 4th century BCE) are reported to have ridiculed Epicurus’ claim that pleasure is the removal of pain by “calling that the condition of a dead man” (Clement of Alexandria 2010, *Stromata* book 2, chap. 21). And Cicero interpreted Epicurus as claiming both that the end of life is pleasure and that “we have no need of it so long as we are free from pain”, a set of claims he regarded as “outright inconsistent” (2004, 2.29). While less critical of Epicurus than the Cyrenaics and Cicero, Ken Binmore joins this history of interpreters who regard pleasure and equanimity as at least partially opposed. He writes:

“Epicurus thought that avoiding pain—including painful thoughts and regret—was much more important than seeking pleasure” (2020, p. 8).

“[For Epicurus,] the ideal life will be one of perfect tranquility. (...) However, I remain doubtful that bliss automatically accompanies tranquility, and I can't go along with the notion that a blissless tranquility by itself justifies neglecting all the innocent pleasures of life and perhaps some not-so-innocent pleasures too” (2020, p. 69).

In this paper, I build on earlier work on Epicurus’ view of the good life and the badness of death (Voorhoeve 2018) to offer an Epicurean view on which this purported tension between a life of the greatest pleasures and tranquillity is resolved.

Epicurus’ claim that the tranquil life is the best life also raises the question how he proposes to value lives. The Benthamite tradition holds that hedonists should weight pleasures and pains by their intensity and duration, so that the value of a life, from a hedonistic point of view, is simply the balance of thus-weighted pleasure over pain (Bentham 1823, Chapter IV; see also Kahneman, Wakker and Sarin 1997). Binmore (2020, p. 67) suggests that Epicurus held a different view, on which we should value lives by the worst experience they contain. I propose a contrasting Epicurean view on which the best life is one in which tranquillity is achieved and maintained until death. In contrast to the Benthamite view, the duration of this period of tranquillity is of no significance. In contrast to Binmore’s interpretation, this Epicurean view is consistent with accepting a worsening of one’s worst experience for the sake of achieving tranquillity.

I proceed as follows. In Section 1, I propose an understanding of the Epicurean tranquil life. In Section 2, I discuss its attendant pleasures. In Section 3, I outline an Epicurean way of valuing lives. I conclude in Section 4.

1. Epicurean Tranquillity

Epicurus' pathway to tranquillity starts from the idea that if we believe that substantial evils are sufficiently likely to befall us, then this will cause us distress. It follows that if we are to be free from such distress, then we must not believe that the likelihood that we will face substantial evils is above the relevant threshold.

Now, one way of not believing that one is likely to face evil is to follow sceptics such as Pyrrho of Elis and avoid having beliefs about such matters. (Pyrrho and his followers apparently saw this avoidance or suspension of belief as a step towards avoiding worry; see Long and Sedley 1987, p. 13 and pp. 17-18). Another would be to seek the false security of incorrect, but comforting beliefs about our susceptibility to harm. However, these routes would be at odds with Epicurus' view that forming correct, well-supported beliefs about nature and the causes of our vulnerability is the best path to equanimity. Therefore, on the Epicurean view I will develop here, in order to avoid worry, we must reasonably believe that the likelihood of substantial evil befalling us is below some threshold value.

This value will depend on the evil in question. A one-in-a-hundred chance of falling and grazing a knee on our daily cycle ride to work would not worry most of us, whereas such a chance of a serious accident likely would. It will also depend on our personality: a naturally calm person may remain untroubled by a risk that would worry a person of a nervous disposition. Within reasonable limits, such variability is not of concern for Epicureanism. All that matters is that the threshold is high enough that we can, by making ourselves sufficiently secure against significant ills and by acquiring reasonable beliefs, be free from the anxiety caused by the prospect of substantial harm.

Epicurean philosophy is devoted to explaining how we can arrange our aims and our lives to achieve this justified sense of security. For Epicurus, the principal source of insecurity and its attendant worries is the fear that our important desires will be thwarted. (He seems to have believed that this will also be the only source of insecurity in reasonable and mentally healthy persons, whose desires, he believed, will track their important interests; see Mitsis 2013, p. 213.) But we can, he argues, greatly reduce this insecurity by shaping our desires and ridding ourselves of those incorrect beliefs that generate anxiety (see the passages from *KD* and *Vatican Sayings* [VS] in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 115-6 and p. 150; *Fragments* [F] 74 in Epicurus 1993, p. 100).

To guide this process, Epicurus distinguishes the following three kinds of wants (*LM* 127-8 and *KD* 29-30, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-16; Nussbaum 1994, chap. 4).

(a) "Natural and necessary" wants are for things that are necessary to support physical and mental well-being. These necessities comprise, in Epicurus' view, not merely the obvious (such as food, drink, clothes, accommodation, and care and companionship), but also correct philosophy. Epicurus believed the latter was required because, as intelligent beings, it is part of living well that we acquire a reasonable view of the world and of the good life (Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 154-7). Moreover, he held that philosophy was needed to cure us of the false beliefs (e.g. in vengeful gods and the possibility of a hellish afterlife) and misguided aims (e.g., to become powerful or famous) that cause us anxiety.

(b) "Natural and unnecessary" wants, Epicurean texts suggest, are desires that we could have without making any mistakes about nature or the good, but that we

could nonetheless, consistently with safeguarding our health and equanimity, either (b-i) avoid acquiring, (b-ii) rid ourselves of, or (b-iii) hold in a blithe spirit, so that we are not frustrated when they are not satisfied.

By way of illustration of (b-i), consider a childless man who knows that if he has a child, he will strongly desire to care for his child and have it be healthy and happy. Suppose that he also knows that, given the threats to his possible child's well-being, these desires will cause him worry. As a famous series of condom commercials stated, he can protect himself against these sources of anxiety by ensuring he does not father any children (Durex 2015).

To illustrate (b-ii), imagine that our childless person wants to have children. If he knows this desire would fade away if he foreclosed the opportunity to have children and cultivated other relationships and interests, then this will be a preference he could free himself from at little cost.

As an example of (b-iii), Epicurus mentions a fancy for luxuries (Scholion on *KD* 29, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 116). If we genuinely take in the fact that these meet our needs no better than basic goods, then, Epicurus held, we can want them in a light-hearted way, as simply a nice way of meeting our needs. So desired, he claimed, extravagances will bring joy if we can have them, but we will feel no frustration if we cannot (*LM* 130, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 114).

(c) "Empty" wants are based on incorrect convictions about the world or what is worth pursuing. Epicureans' prime example is the desire to avoid death because we believe we would face an afterlife of suffering.

Epicurus' advice regarding these types of desires was as follows. First, to maintain our natural and necessary desires. Second, to acquire and maintain natural and unnecessary desires only so long as we have assurance that we will be able to satisfy them without trouble. In the absence of such assurance, we should avoid acquiring them, or divest ourselves of them (*KD* 8-10 and *VS* 51, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 115-16). Third, to entirely rid ourselves of empty desires by rejecting the false beliefs about the world or the good life that undergird them. The reasoning involved in establishing these beliefs' falsity was, Epicurus thought, accessible to ordinary people. Epicurus also assumed that our psychology was such that, with reflection and daily practice—the "mental exercise" of keeping key Epicurean ideas at the forefront of our minds that he recommends in the *Letter to Menoeceus*—our erroneous convictions and wayward desires would eventually disappear (Mitsis 2013, p. 213).

Limiting our desires to those that concern necessities along with those that we can be confident will not be frustrated may seem a straightforward piece of advice. However, it demands substantial adjustments to our aims and way of living. For it requires rendering our central pursuits sufficiently secure against failure, serious illness, and death.

A first set of adjustments is that, with the sole exception of the project of becoming a tranquil Epicurean, we would need to forgo any commitment to risky projects. Such commitments—such as Binmore's aim throughout his career to contribute to several academic disciplines and shape policy, including by organizing "the biggest auction ever" (Binmore and Klemperer 2002)—give hostages to fortune. The worry that they might come to nothing would likely disturb our tranquillity. Therefore, Epicurus' advice would be to

either devote ourselves only to comparatively safe projects or to avoid deep commitments to projects altogether. In the latter case, we would, I suppose, pursue many of our goals as an amateur might: as a way of filling our days with something interesting and worthwhile. But we could not pursue them with the mindset that much hangs on our being successful at doing them.

Second, Epicureanism requires that we should avoid (or relinquish) attachment to people whose vulnerability to harm would upset us if we cared deeply for them. This implies a substantial emotional withdrawal from others. However, contrary to some commentators (e.g., Luper-Foy 1987, p. 244; Luper 1996, pp. 144-5), it is not a complete withdrawal. As mentioned, Epicurus held that a form of friendship is a basic need—indeed, “by far the greatest [thing] wisdom acquires for the blessedness of life” (*KD* 27 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 126). While, on his view, we seek friendship out of prudential motives—because we need to socialize with others and require their good will and support—we also realize that we cannot have these goods without genuine mutual affection. We therefore must seek out good companions and try to develop real love for them (*KD* 27-8; *Vatican Sayings* [VS] 23, 28, 34, 39, 52, 66, and 78, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 126-7). What is true, however, is that since evils that befall our friends will cause us pain, we should choose only companions who are devoted to, and capable of, making their welfare secure—fellow Epicureans being natural candidates. As far as family is concerned, the texts suggest that Epicurus advised against marriage and children (Brennan 1996). But Epicureans seem to have accepted that when we do have family members, we will typically have natural and unalterable concern for them, so that we will be worried if they face a substantial risk of harm and will be upset if they come to harm (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* [DRN] 5.1011-27 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 127). Moreover, insofar as our family members are our dependents, we may be anxious about how our own illness, disability, or death might affect them. Sensible Epicurean advice in relation to families is therefore not to cut ourselves off from loved ones, but rather to render their well-being as secure as possible—for instance, by joining an Epicurean community with them, where they can be assured of care. (As, for example, Epicurus arranged in his testament for the care of the children of his friend Metrodorus; see *F* 36 in Epicurus 1993, p. 95.)

Third, more generally, the Epicurean aim to render ourselves tranquil requires that we adjust all our aims to become near-invulnerable to harm from death. This requires giving up all important desires for which our prospects of dying are such that they raise the chance of these desires being frustrated above the “distress threshold”. By way of illustration, consider my strong desire to be around to see all my children reach their mid-twenties. This would require me to reach the age of 70. My chance of dying before this age, the UK Office of National Statistics informs me, is around 17% (Office of National Statistics, 2020). This is substantial enough to threaten my tranquillity. Suppose that I am unable to substantially lower this chance and that, if I maintain this preference, I would also be unable to revise my emotional reaction to this chance of this preference being thwarted. Then, in order to achieve tranquillity, I would, if I could, be required to give up this desire in favour of a desire with a lower risk of being thwarted by my death, such as merely that my children will be well taken care of and seen through to early adulthood by someone close to them.

The cultivation of one type of desire is likely to play an important role in rendering us calm in the face of death. What we might call “merely conditional” wants involve desiring something only on the condition that we are alive. That is to say, we have a preference for

this thing if we are around, but do not have a preference to be around while having secured this thing over being dead (Luper-Foy 1987). An example would be a desire to spend time in the company of friends next year if we are alive then, but no wish to remain alive to spend time with friends next year. Obviously, being alive without our friends' company would thwart this desire. But our death would not, so that making our future-oriented desires merely conditional is a way of ensuring that our aims cannot be frustrated by death.

Once we have made ourselves sufficiently invulnerable to death by curtailing our desires in these ways and by choosing to live in circumstances in which our remaining desires are unlikely to be frustrated, Epicurus held that the possibility of pain also generally need not disturb our peace of mind. For, he claimed, we can arrange our lives in such a way that minor, chronic bodily pains permit us to enjoy many of life's pleasures so that life will still be pleasant on balance. And more intense pains, which would rob us of these pleasures, he claimed, will be "present only for a very short time" (PD 4), presumably because they show that death from natural causes is close, or because, if such pains are likely to persist, we can commit suicide without disrupting our plans. As Cicero's spokesperson for Epicureanism, Torquatus, put it: "we may serenely quit life's theatre when the play has ceased to please us" (Cicero 2004, 1.49).

In sum, the Epicurean approach for attaining serenity has two elements.

The first is adjusting our wants, limiting them to the natural and necessary desires along with those natural and unnecessary desires that we can be confident won't be foiled. Crucially, this involves shaping our forward-looking desires so that our death would be unlikely to cause them to be thwarted.

The second is to ensure adequate resources and living arrangements. Under minimally decent social and economic circumstances (a society with rule of law, general respect for basic rights over our bodies, minds, and possessions, and a moderate level of economic development), and with enough people of Epicurean persuasion to form a community, we can, Epicurus held, be reasonably confident that our properly limited desires will not be thwarted (*LM* 130, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 114). Practically speaking, for Epicurus, this involved partial social withdrawal to live simply and securely with likeminded companions on the edge of town.

Epicureans believed that it was possible for many people to follow this two-pronged strategy and that if they did, it would suffice to establish the conditions for peace of mind. Clearly, this claim relies on an empirical assumption about our psychology—that many of us are, at least in principle, capable of adjusting our aims and emotions in the manner required. This assumption is open to question. Here, however, I will set this question aside to pursue the question raised by the Cyrenaics, Cicero, and Binmore: in which senses, if any, is the tranquil life pleasurable?

2. The Pleasures of Tranquillity

I submit that the Epicurean tranquil life yields five types of pleasure.

First, we can, once tranquil, take pleasure in the fact that we enjoy good health and no longer suffer from anxiety and other sources of mental distress (Splawn 2002). As Epicurus writes:

“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” (*KD* 18 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115).

While Epicurus here focuses on the pleasing comparison of current serenity with our troubled past self, his follower Lucretius adds that the pleasure at contemplating pains from which we are free is at least partly based on comparing our situation favourably with that of others:

“Pleasantest of all is to be master of those tranquil regions well-fortified on high by the teaching of the wise. From there you can look down on others and see them (...) straying in their quest for life: competing in talent, fighting over social class, striving day and night (...) to rise to the heights of wealth (...). O unseeing hearts! Do you not see that nature screams for nothing but the removal of pain and the mind’s enjoyment of the joyous sensation when anxiety and fear have been taken away?” (*DRN* 2.1-61 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 120).

This passage suggests a superciliousness that is at odds with our everyday picture of a serene sage. But we can understand the pleasure in question as simply being happy that we are free from troubles that people often experience, without thinking that it is good that others are so troubled or looking down on them. (An example would be the joy a woman experiences on having an unproblematic pregnancy, which is in part the result of the fact that she knows that pregnancies are often fraught with risk and discomfort.)

While there need be no sense of superiority in enjoying that we are at peace rather than distressed, there can be a justified pride in having freed ourselves of misery through exercising our rational capacities to arrive at a correct view of nature and of the good life and by choosing to shape our desires and circumstances accordingly (*VS* 45 in Epicurus 1993, p. 81). This satisfaction in our achievements is the second type of pleasure that we may experience when tranquil.

Third, when tranquil, we will feel secure and contented, because we have what we need and have a high degree of assurance that no central desires of ours will be frustrated.

Fourth, because we have made ourselves secure against fortune, we can enjoy a sense of control over our lives. Psychological research suggests that this contributes to happiness by fostering self-esteem and a sense of satisfaction (Larson 1989; Myers and Diener 1995; Grob 2003). It also suggests that a sense of control makes our happiness more robust: there appear to be neurological mechanisms through which a perceived lack of control leads to a stronger adverse response to threats or harms, while a sense of control generates resilience (Southwick and Southwick 2018).

Finally, equanimity allows us to be fully “present”—fully absorbed in our activities and experiences (Striker 1993). Given the lifestyle Epicurus recommends, these activities will involve meeting our needs, being at leisure, spending time with friends, and engaging in philosophy and other pursuits in a light-hearted way. These activities and experiences will generally be thoroughly enjoyable, and their joys will not be tinged with worry or frustration.

In sum, attaining tranquillity permits us to taste a range of pleasures: happiness at having overcome past (and commonly experienced) suffering and pride at having done so through

our rational agency; feeling satisfied, safe from harm, and in charge of our lives; and the joys that attend absorption in our experiences and activities.

This allows us to dismiss the Cyrenaics' claim that the tranquil state is "the condition of a corpse," as well as to rebut Cicero's objection that Epicurus first tells us to seek pleasure and then tells us that we have no need of it once pain and anxiety are removed. Moreover, contrary to Binmore's remark that tranquillity requires "neglecting all the innocent pleasures of life," we can see that such pleasures are not merely consistent with Epicurean tranquillity but will be enhanced by it. Finally, since Epicurus makes clear that every pleasure is in itself good, the "naughty pleasures" that Binmore complains we would miss out on can also be enjoyed, so long as their pursuit doesn't cause anxiety, frustration, or substantial physical pain.

3. Valuing Lives

We must now ask how Epicureans propose to establish that the pleasures of tranquillity are the most valuable, in the sense that they make for the best (or most choiceworthy) life. What method of evaluation of pleasures does Epicureanism employ?

One method that is not open to Epicureans is to follow Jeremy Bentham (1823, Chapter IV) and contemporary Benthamites such as Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman, Wakker and Sarin 1997) and value an episode of pleasure by its intensity and duration. On this view, the value of a life, from a hedonistic point of view, is simply the sum of all time-and intensity-weighted pleasure it contains, minus the sum of so-weighted pains.

One reason this approach doesn't fit Epicureanism is that Epicurus held that a reasonable person's desires will track their view of what makes their life go best (Mitsis 2013, p. 213). Since, on this Benthamite view, more pleasurable time alive always makes a life better, it would, if adopted, generate in a reasonable person a desire to live a long, pleasurable life and would therefore cause them to see death (when the alternative is pleasurable existence) as a great misfortune. But Epicurus rejects the idea that the value of a pleasurable life is always enhanced by increasing its duration. He writes:

"The flesh places the limits of pleasure at infinity and needs an infinite time to bring it about. But the intellect, by making a rational calculation of the end and the limit which govern the flesh, and by dispelling the fears about eternity, brings about the complete life, so that we no longer need infinite time. (...) [N]or even when circumstances bring about our departure from life does it suppose, as it perishes, that it has in any way fallen short of the best life" (*KD* 20-1 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 150).

Binmore's interpretation is sensitive to this aspect of Epicurus' thought. He proposes a view on which only the quality of episodes of experience matters, and not their duration (2020, p. 66).¹ He also assumes that Epicurus thought that avoiding pain was far more important

¹ If I understand Binmore's view correctly, it involves a fine-grained individuation of "episodes of experience", on which, for example, the first moments of a given type of experience (say, of engaging in philosophical conversation in a garden) count as a different episode of experience than later moments if these involve different sensations—say, of having new insights, or developing a longing to end the conversation and instead play a game of croquet. On this view, it becomes a matter of definition that an "episode" consists entirely of experiences which are, for the person experiencing them, phenomenologically indistinguishable from each other (if they were so distinguishable, they would have different qualities and hence belong to different episodes). Binmore then asserts, I think, that a person experiencing an episode (so defined) will be indifferent

than—indeed, ranked lexically above—experiencing pleasure (ibid., p. 8). Finally, he proposes an Epicurean rule for assessing lives which is consistent with this lexical priority for alleviating pain: to value lives by the least valuable episode they contain (ibid., p. 67).²

In contrast to Binmore’s proposal, on the Epicurean view I put forward here, the special importance of removing pain and distress is not based on the idea that removing pain is lexically prior to experiencing pleasure. Instead, as I shall now explain, it lies in the fact that a particular way of removing pain and worry (through correct reasoning and wise choice and avoidance) is an essential part of leading an excellent life.

There are, I propose, several reasons why Epicureans regard tranquillity as particularly valuable.

First, as argued in Section 2, its joys are varied and include the pleasures of daily life in their most vivid form.

Second, Epicureanism is based on the idea that lives that are not tranquil are typically unhappy: due to false religious beliefs, fear of death, and wanting more than they can be confident of securing, most ordinary people are beset with worry.

Third, Epicureans hold that the pleasures of tranquillity are valuable because they are produced by inquiry into nature and the best way to live, by crafting our desires accordingly, and by living so that these desires are unlikely to be thwarted. As such, they are an achievement of reason, and one that, as we have seen, leaves luck only a modest role in shaping our lives. The Epicurean tranquil life is therefore autonomous, in the sense that it involves being guided by our reasoned view of the world and our conception of the good and accomplishing what we set out to achieve.

Finally, as Epicurus claims in the passage just quoted from *Key Doctrines* 20-1, once we have attained tranquillity, our lives are complete. After all, tranquillity is meant to be attainable even when death is imminent. Death must therefore not thwart any strongly held desires of the serene Epicurean. Once we have attained peace of mind, the very desire to remain serene must therefore be a purely conditional desire. That is, as good Epicureans, once we have attained tranquillity, we will want to spend any further time alive in this condition, but we will not want to stay alive in order to remain in it. If we then make the further assumption that something can be bad for a thoughtful, informed adult only if it frustrates a desire of theirs, then it follows that, once we have attained peace of mind through sagacious means, death will not be bad for us. A long time alive in a tranquil state will be welcome—because better than a life of misery—but it will not improve our lives over living a shorter time continuously in the tranquil state before dying. As the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus put it:

“The one who understands, having grasped that he is capable of achieving everything sufficient for the good life, immediately and for the rest of his life walks

to its duration. Binmore suggests that an Epicurean judgment of a person’s good will follow their preferences in this regard. It would follow that duration of an episode is irrelevant to their good.

² It is worth noting, however, that this is not the only rule for ranking lives by their experience that is consistent with assigning lexical priority to alleviating pains over pursuing pleasures. For one could also hold that it is worth alleviating a host of less bad pains instead of improving the most painful experience one undergoes.

about already ready for burial, and enjoys the single day as if it were an eternity” (*De Morte* XXXVIII.14-19 in Warren 2004, p. 152).

On the proposed form of Epicureanism, tranquillity, properly won, is a great prize. Contrary to Binmore’s proposed evaluative rule for lives, it may therefore be worth suffering a period of more intense distress in order to later become tranquil. (An example might be undergoing the limited period of intense pain of a breakup with a passionate but inconstant lover who keeps one from experiencing tranquillity rather than staying with them and experiencing less awful, but more enduring, distress.)

The Epicureanism put forward here differs from Binmore’s maximin episodic hedonism in two further respects. First, it does not provide a complete ranking of all lives by their hedonic quality. Instead, it merely identifies the tranquil life as excellent and more choiceworthy than typical lives. And while it certainly holds that, other things equal, an episode of pain will make a life worse and that replacing such an unpleasant episode with a pleasant one would improve a life, it says nothing precise about how to quantify or rank the value of such episodes or of lives in general.

Second, the Epicurean grounds adduced for valuing the tranquil life are not purely hedonic. This is, I admit, an unorthodox aspect of the proposed view.³ Epicureanism is widely taken to be a form of hedonism, and the latter is understood as the view that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and pain the only intrinsic evil. In defence of my proposal: the outlined view is fully compatible with Epicurus’ claims that pleasure is, in itself, always good, and pain, in itself, always bad and that experience is a precondition for anything being either good or bad in itself. It merely holds that the positive value of pleasures is enhanced if they result from the successful use of our rational capacities to understand the world, form a conception of the good life, and act accordingly. A credulous person who attains peace of mind through believing, without good reason, that they cannot come to harm because they are beloved of the gods and who, by chance, lives pleasantly to the end of their days and dies happy believing they will go to heaven, leads a good, because enjoyable, life, on the proposed view. However, they do not lead an excellent life, since they lack the achievements involved in acquiring correct beliefs about nature and the good life. On this interpretation, then, Epicurus’ celebration of “sober reasoning” (see, e.g. *LM* 135 in Epicurus 1993, p. 68) is not merely based on the idea that reason is instrumentally useful in attaining tranquillity; it is also based on the role it plays in making the tranquil life valuable.⁴

4. Concluding Comments

Keen philosophers from Cicero to Binmore have questioned Epicurus’ equation of the tranquil life with a life of pleasure. They have also puzzled over Epicurus’ approach to valuing lives. Here, I have offered an Epicurean account of the pleasures of tranquillity and their supreme value. My aim has been to clear up what I take to be some misconceptions about Epicurus’ views and put forward a form of Epicureanism that represents an interesting view of the good life that is immune to some familiar objections. That does not,

³ Mitsis (1988, pp. 54–5) notes that Epicurus’ grounds for valuing pleasures extended beyond their hedonic quality. But he does not attribute to Epicurus the view I outline here.

⁴ As I argue in Voorhoeve (2018, pp. 18-20), one advantage of this view is that it is invulnerable to several leading objections to hedonism, including Aristotle’s (1999, 1095b20) objection that it is a view of the good life “fit only for grazing animals”, Nozick’s (1974, pp. 44-5) “experience machine” objection, and Annas’ (1993 p. 347) claim that the tranquil life is “too passive”.

of course, amount to a full defence of this view or of Epicurean guidance on how to pursue it. Indeed, as we have seen, the view rests on an assumption about the malleability of our aims, desires, and emotions that requires more empirical support than I have provided here. Its claim to offer a life that is experientially better than ordinary lives, which it takes to be fraught with worry, is also in part an empirical claim which needs backing up with evidence. Finally, the proposed view requires us to limit our ambitions to things that are readily achievable and to close ourselves off from people who are likely to fare ill. It may well be better (and more admirable) to live more ambitiously and open-heartedly, thereby exposing ourselves to the worry that our projects will come to nothing and that our loved ones will suffer. Even if that is our conclusion, it is useful to understand the Epicurean tranquil life, its pleasures, and its price. For once we realize that at least some of our anxieties and distress are the inevitable cost of our commitments to risky projects and vulnerable others, we may be reconciled to our lack of tranquillity.

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