



Cyrenaic Hedonism

Nicholas Capelli

Hedonism is an ethical system that maintains that pleasure is the highest good in life. There were two main groups of Hedonists in the ancient world. The first group, the Cyrenaics, believed that only the pleasures of the body were important for happiness, while the second group, the Epicureans thought that the pleasures of the mind were ultimately more important than those of the body. We will return to Epicureanism later in the course. For now let's focus on the cruder type of hedonism espoused by the Cyrenaics.

The founder of the Cyrenaic school was Aristippus, who was a disciple of Socrates. He was born in Cyrene (hint: the School was named after Aristippus' birthplace) in 435 BC, and died in Athens in 366 BC. Aristippus' philosophy, while a bit simplistic, is actually one that many human beings would probably agree with: he held that immediate pleasure is the highest good in life and ought to be pursued for the sake of happiness, while pain and suffering ought to be avoided at all costs.

He further maintained that life itself is very short. We can neither live in the past, nor in the future, but only in the present. The present, of course, is this moment that we are living right NOW. Rather than living one's life in pursuit of honors or wealth or even wisdom (all which either existed in a past long gone or which may or may not exist in an uncertain future), we should focus instead on those immediate goods which we have available to us right now: the enjoyment of sensual pleasure.

Not only are immediate sensual pleasures thought by Aristippus to be best, but he also rejected the idea that the duration of pleasures was significant. The brevity of pleasures, he felt, does not take away from their worth, and the aim of life was to have as many pleasurable moments as we can.

The Cyrenaics also believed that we ought to strive for the maximum intensity in our pleasures, since the more intense the experience, the more pleasurable it will be for the individual.

And finally, a good hedonist would always aim at having as much diversity as possible in the pleasures that he pursues. Variety is, after all, the spice of life. After a while drinking the same wine, eating the same kinds of foods, and sleeping with the same kinds of people can become boring. We must, then, shake things up a bit, occasionally going for exotic—and perhaps even dangerous—pleasures. (I'll leave you to figure out exactly how this might be accomplished.)

The Cyrenaics made no distinction (as Epicurus later would) between better or worse pleasures. They were only concerned with how (1) immediate, (2) physical, (3) brief, (4) intense, and (5) diverse the pleasure we strive for. In this sense being able to eat a rich and sumptuously prepared meal or spending a few hours frolicking on a beautiful beach in the Caribbean are to be preferred to such intangible pleasures as the enjoyment of intellectual contemplation or stimulating conversation.

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