Philosophies of Happiness
Appendix 7: Epicurus: Theory of Perception and Atomism: The Psychological Dimension of Pleasure and Pain

The foundation of Epicurean epistemology is known as the “canonic,” a series of criteria by which sound judgments are made. There are two main criteria of judgment: sense-perception (aisthēsis) and feeling (pathos). Sense perception gathers information from the world through the medium of sense organs, which discriminate sense objects. As Elizabeth Asmis explains, “Aisthēsis is directed at objects other than one’s condition, whereas a feeling (pathos) is an awareness of one’s own condition.”

It is important to note that Epicurus uses the term pathos in two ways. When discussing the senses of hearing and smell in the Letter to Herodotus, he uses the term pathos in a generic way to describe a condition of being affected. However, in the technical sense in which pathos serves as a criterion for judgment—giving evidence about things not presently experienced—Diogenes Laertius tells us that the Epicureans affirm that there are two pathê, pleasure and pain. These pathê arise in every living being, one familiar/akin (oikeion) and one alien (allotrian), by whose means choice and avoidance are determined. Pleasure and pain tell us what will preserve the well-being of the organism and what will harm it; in this sense, the pathê serve as a criterion for action.

In Epicurus’ discussion of hearing and smelling, he uses the term pathos in both ways. The sense-perception of vision takes place when a stream of fine layers of atoms, known as eidōla (apparitions or semblances; Latin, simulacra) reaches from solids to the sense organ. They are so fine that they cannot be seen in themselves, but they can preserve the shape and color of the solid in vision; hearing and smell also take place by the occurrence of other streams. When a configuration of atoms enters the sense organs, it produces a presentation (phantasia). The sense organ, however, does not simply receive the information passively, but actively responds by an act of directing itself to the object, called epibolē, an “application” or “thrust” toward the thing. This is an act of attention, an act of connecting, attending to, or directing
oneself to an object of awareness.\textsuperscript{vi}

Hearing, for example, takes place when a current passes from the object, whether person or thing, which emits voice or sound or noise, or produces the sensation of hearing (\textit{akoustikon pathos}) in any way whatever. The blow that is struck in us when we utter a sound causes a displacement of the particles that produces a current resembling breath, and this displacement gives rise to the aural sensation (\textit{akoustikon pathos}).\textsuperscript{vii}

Here it seems \textit{pathos} might refer to the physical impact of the blows, the acoustic stimuli, as when one is assaulted by the sound of a jackhammer, to be distinguished from actual perception (\textit{aisthēsis}). Thus sometimes information comes at the sense organ in an inchoate way; the ear may perceive a loud noise, but not make out the source of the noise:

\begin{quote}
this current is broken up into homogeneous particles, which at the same time preserve a certain mutual connection and a distinctive unity extending to the object that emitted them, and thus for the most part cause the perception in that case, or if not, merely indicate the presence of the external object.\textsuperscript{viii}
\end{quote}

Epicurus thus notices that at times one is merely aware that a sound has been emitted from something present; at other times, one actually perceives and makes out the source of the sound. It is possible that in the phrase \textit{akoustikon pathos} (aural sensation), Epicurus is using the term \textit{pathos} in a generic sense to refer to a condition of being affected—here, by the physical impact of atoms upon the ear. On the other hand, in this case, he may be using the term in a way similar to \textit{aisthēsis}, an actual sense perception.\textsuperscript{ix}

In the very next passage, however, when describing the sense-perception of smell, his use of \textit{pathos} slides into the technical sense of pleasure and pain. He goes on to tell us that smelling, like hearing, would produce no sensation/feeling (\textit{pathos}), were there not particles conveyed from the object of the proper sort for exciting the organ of smelling, some of one sort, some of another, some exciting it confused and strangely (\textit{tetragmenos kai allotrios}) others without disturbance and in a familiar way
Here he is combining sense perception proper with the experience of pleasure and pain. The perception of smell is either familiar and pleasing or unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Thus in this passage it seems the term *pathos* is serving two functions: it suggests a sensation strong enough to be measured, and one that is either familiar and pleasant or alien and unpleasant.

Most often, Epicurus uses *pathos* in the second, technical sense of a felt quality of attraction or aversion. We experience our own condition as pleasant and familiar or unpleasant and alien. This is because the *pathê* refer to atomic conditions. When we are met by information from the external world, the atoms of our sense organs are either preserved in their natural flow or find their natural flow disrupted. We experience the preservation of the natural flow or order of our atoms as familiar, appropriate and “right;” its disruption we experience as alien, inappropriate, and unpleasant. Pleasure is what preserves our sense of natural flow, pain is what disrupts it.

Pleasure is thus what philosophers of mind call an “intentional state;” it contains an awareness and primitive response to the object of awareness, even at the level of the atoms of our sense organs. Pleasure thus entails what philosophers of mind call an “attitude”—a psychological stance or orientation—toward an object. Every *pathos* has a feeling tone either of pleasure or pain, attraction or aversion. A *pathos* contains an awareness of an object and at the same time a “liking” or “disliking” of that object. In Asmis’ words, unlike sense-perceptions, feelings represent “an attitude, pro or contra, concerning the object of awareness. To attend to something pleasant is to be attracted to it; to attend to something painful is to have an aversion from it.”

How does this atomic theory shed light on Epicurus’ understanding of pleasure? We recall that the Cyrenaics recognized only one form of pleasure, kinetic pleasure. They view the katastematic condition as one of a corpse; if there is no satisfaction of desire, there is no pleasure. Epicurus, in contrast, recognizes two forms of pleasure: katastematic and kinetic. Katastematic pleasure is the pleasure of a settled condition; kinetic pleasure, that of a moving condition. However, we can see now that this
terminology is somewhat confusing, because in fact both conditions contain movement. In the katastematic condition, the atoms move in natural, smooth patterns, whereas in pain, these patterns are disrupted. In kinetic pleasure, the atoms move in patterns of pleasurable excitement. We might therefore translate *kinēsis* here as “stimulation;” both types of pleasure preserve patterns of the motion of atoms, but the kinetic patterns are more excited ones, produced by external stimulation. Kinetic pleasure is thus that which occurs when the organism in its natural, katastematic state of pleasure is stimulated in a way that preserves its natural flow.

The Psychological Dimension of Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus’ psychology can help us understand how Epicurus might describe what takes place on the atomic level in the experience of pleasure and pain. First we must note that Epicurus’ *Letter to Herodotus* describes the soul as a material entity. A scholastic addition tells us that it has a rational component, located in the fine atoms of the chest, and an irrational component, distributed throughout the body. Here Epicurus explains the function of the soul, in relation to the body, in the production of sense-perceiving (*aisthēsis*):

Further one must hold firmly that the soul is most responsible for sense-perception. But [the soul] would not have acquired this [power] if it were not somehow enclosed by the rest of the aggregate. But the rest of the aggregate, though it provides for the soul this cause [of sense-perception], itself has a share in this property because of the soul; still it does not share in all the features [of sense-perception] which the soul has.

Thus the soul on its own could not perceive; it must be enclosed by the rest of the aggregate, i.e. the bodily enclosure. It is the conjoining of soul atoms and somatic atoms that makes sense-perception possible:

Hence on the departure of the soul, [the body] loses [the capacity for] sense-perception. For [the body] does not possess the power (*dynamis*) [of sense-perception] in itself, but another thing (the soul) congenital with (*syngegenēmenon*) the body provides it. And this other thing, when the power (*dynamēōs*) it has been realized (*syntelestheisēs*) through change/stimulation (*kata tēn kinēsin*), at once produces in itself a sense-perceptual quality (*symptôma aisthētikon*) and through its joint affection and collaboration transmits it to the body.
This passage holds a key to understanding Epicurus’ materialism. The body on its own does not have the capacity for sense-perception. It is soul that provides this capacity. The subjective, qualitative dimension of consciousness—what it is to feel a quality—arises through 1) the meeting of soul atoms with atoms of the aggregate or frame (the body), and 2) the soul’s activation through meeting with sense objects. The sense-perceptual quality of experience arises through the joining of psychic and somatic atoms and their collaborative meeting with sense objects.

Sense perception is thus caused by the movement of atoms. The disordered or ordered motion of atoms in the body is registered by the atoms of the non-rational soul, producing a sense-perceptual quality. On one level the experience of pleasure and pain is purely material; it is produced by moving atoms and perceived by other moving atoms. But this does not mean that we must deny that we have a subjective experience of sense-perception, including a felt experience of pleasure and pain. There is no more reason to deny this qualitative experience for Epicurus than for modern scientific understandings of the relationship between mind and brain. It is mysterious on any account.xx

In light of this analysis, let us investigate the experience of pleasure and pain, beginning with pain, which is more tangible than pleasure. Let us say a hand touches a hot stove. The sense-perception (aisthēsis) here entails the perception of heat, given by the moving stream of atoms (eidōla) that come from without. The hand reacts with aversion—a feeling (pathos) of pain, reflecting the disordered state of atoms in the body, which is registered immediately by the atoms of the non-rational soul (alogon). So far animals and humans are alike. The pain—the attitude of aversion to the sensation—is also perceived by the rational soul (logikon). Our body is in pain, just like the body of an animal. However, a rational being can deliberately focus awareness on the fact that we are in pain. Animals have the sensations of pleasure and pain, while humans can consciously reflect on or attend to these sensations, through an act of directed attention (epibolē).

Now one question is whether the object of our focused awareness—the object of the rational soul—is the state of the non-rational soul, or whether there is a kind of mirror image in the rational soul.
of the pain in the non-rational soul. Let us propose one possible model: 1) The pain represents a
disordered state of the atoms of the body; 2) the non-rational soul immediately registers the disordered
state of the atoms with an aversion; 3) the rational soul also immediately perceives the pain, there is a
kind of mirror image in the rational soul of the pain in the non-rational soul; 4) we can bring the sensation
of pain into and out of our conscious awareness, as the rational soul makes it the object of conscious
reflection (epibolê). Accordingly, our minds can forget about pain, or consciously think about it; we can
also think about what it felt like even after it has left us. Finally, we can cultivate a rational attitude
toward the experience of pain—both its immediate registering in the non-rational soul and the mirror
image of it in our rational soul.

Current neuro-psychological studies—for example studies of the effects of meditative practices—
support this Epicurean view. In pain clinics, patients in chronic pain are taught to view the sensation of
pain dispassionately. Researchers also make a distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is the
automatic experience of the body; suffering arises from the judgment, attitude, or response minds attach
to the physical experience of pain. Patients can learn to tolerate the physical experience of pain without
suffering. In Epicurean terms, the cultivation of the mind can affect the natural attitudes of the
irrational soul. The atoms of the body are disrupted, but the irrational atoms of the soul are trained not to
recoil from that disruption.

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i The third, preconception (proleipsis), is derived from repeated sense experiences.
iii Diogenes Laertius 10.34; cf. Letter to Menoeceus 128-29, Cicero On Ends 1.30 and 2.31.
v Diogenes Laertius 10.47-53 .
vi Diogenes Laertius 10.52.
viii Ibid.
ix See David Konstan, “Epicurean Passions,” 196, note 3; David Glidden, “Epicurus on Self-Perception,”
American Philosophical Quarterly Volume 16, Number 4, 299-300.
x DL 10.53.
xi J. M. Rist suggests that there is a connection between the two senses of pathos.

Every affection or condition received from contact with an external object will contain an experience of
pleasure or pain, as it will either preserve the state of the creature’s atoms or disrupt it. Since every
sentient being is aware of the flow of atoms, when an influx of atoms have contact with it, it either experiences these contacts as pleasant, if they maintain its state, or painful, if they disrupt it. The perception (*aisthêsis*) of the external object can be accompanied by a feeling (*pathos*) of pleasure or pain, a primitive response of attraction or aversion, based on whether the atomic experience is preserving or disrupting the atoms of one’s being. See J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 30.

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xiii Buddhist epistemology has a similar description. Reflecting on the theory of the Vasubandhu, a great fourth century theorist of the Yogacara (Consciousness-Only) School, Georges Dreyfus and Evan Thompson write, “mental states are not just states of awareness; they also actively engage their objects, qualifying them as pleasant or unpleasant, approaching them with a particular attitude, and so on.” Dreyfus and Thompson, “Asian Perspectives: Indian Theories of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*: 89—114, at 98. See also Rupert Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*. For more on pleasure in contemporary philosophy of mind see Appendix 1 to this book, “Pleasure: Attitude or Object?”

xvii *Letter to Herodotus*, DL 10.66.
xviii *Letter to Herodotus*, DL 10.63-64.

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xx David Konstan suggests that conversely, perhaps the harmonious movements of mental kinetic pleasure can also be registered by the atoms of the irrational soul, which might be present in the heart, the seat of the rational soul (*logikon*). Thus there could be a perceptual experience of mental kinetic pleasure; joy at philosophical discourse might make our bodies “feel” a certain way. And the mental pleasure of *ataraxia*—the lack of anxiety or worry—could likewise “feel” like a calm sense of peace or relaxed freshness. This is of course speculative, but makes sense, given Epicurus’ notions that 1) all sentient beings seek pleasure and the avoidance of pain 2) there are two *pathê*—pleasure and pain—by which all sentient beings make choices; the telos is lack of anxiety and lack of bodily pain; the telos is pleasure.


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xii Philip Merlan argues that there are two ways to look at katastematic pleasure. One is that it is static; it is pleasure that is not caused by movement of the organism. Another way is that it is constitutional pleasure. The natural mental and physical state of the organism is a pleasant one; there is a natural joy of living or being. This is in contrast to a tradition brought by Aristotle and others in the name of Anaxagoras, that the natural state of being is one of pain or discomfort; that sensation is uncomfortable and disruptive. Epicurus believes that pain is a disruption of a natural state of pleasure. See Philip Merlan, “*Hedonê* in Epicurus and Aristotle,” *Studies in Epicurus and Aristotle*: 1-37. We can compare this with
the tradition of early Buddhism—the notion that life is dukkha, suffering, frustration, out of kilter. Later, Mahayana Buddhism introduces the opposite view that the natural state of being is Buddha nature, the nature of awakening. It is ignorance that causes the misperceptions that create suffering.