

Pleasure in Epicurean and Christian orthodox conceptions of happiness¹

Aleksandar Fatić²

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia
fatic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

Dimitrios Dentsoras

Department of Philosophy, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Dimitrios.Dentsoras@ad.umanitoba.ca

The essay examines the central role that pleasure plays in a wide range of conceptualisations of happiness or ‘good life’ from Epicurean hedonism, to Christian asceticism, to contemporary cases of pastoral and philosophical counseling. Despite the apparent moral chasm between hedonists and ascetics, a look at the practices promoted by Epicurus and the Christian monastic fathers reveals striking similarities. The reason is that, at a fundamental level, both agree that one should reject the vulgar pleasures that society glorifies, and develop a refined attitude that seeks the appropriate and natural pleasures, while ignoring the harmful or unnecessary ones. And such an attitude can only be acquired through moral training, either by philosophical instruction and reflection, or by pastoral counselling. We highlight some important parallels regarding the connection between pleasure and happiness, as conceived by Epicureans and monastic fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church. We begin by discussing elements of Epicureanism that can also be found in its rival philosophical schools and Christianity, mainly the emphasis on forming the right conception of happiness and acting in accordance with it. We then examine the connection between morality and happiness in the Christian Orthodox monasticism. We argue that Christian ascetic ethics not only condone some types of pleasures, but in fact require them as elements of happiness in this life that play an instrumental role for the Christian soteriological dogma. The argument has wider philosophical significance because it shows that pleasure is indeed a fundamental conceptual ingredient of happiness across different normative ethical contexts.

Pleasure, happiness and the role of philosophy in antiquity

It is commonplace among modern philosophers to present the fourth-century BCE philosopher Epicurus as the founder of the doctrine of hedonism, according to which pleasure is the ultimate goal of action, and the yardstick for determining an action’s moral worth. Yet, Epicurus was not the first to voice the view that pleasure is the good. Neither did he think of himself as making a radical claim, when he presented pleasure as his *summum bonum*. Hedonism is also the view that Socrates advocates in the Platonic dialogues, most eminently in *Protagoras*, where he defines virtue as the craft of being able to achieve the highest amount of pleasure (*Protagoras* 357b). And, while Socrates also presents some very different conceptions of the good and virtue, elsewhere in Plato, a number of Socrates’ contemporaries, as well as prominent contemporary scholars,

1 The authors are indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their exceptionally useful and thoughtful comments, which have improved both the clarity of our argument and its overall presentations. The responsibility for any faults, of course, lies solely with the authors.

2 Corresponding author.

thought that hedonism was really Socrates' moral theory of choice.³ Moreover, for all of Socrates' moral radicalism (which earned him the nickname 'the gadfly of Athens'), he introduces the view that pleasure is the good in Plato as if he is merely presenting an uncontroversial view that most Athenians would not object to. If anything, most Athenians of the classical and Hellenistic period seem to be hedonists, in one way or another.

These facts notwithstanding, a number of evident reasons advocate the view that Epicurus deservedly came to be considered as the father of hedonism. The first is that Epicurus and his followers were the first to construct a systematic philosophical theory that contained in its core the idea that pleasure is the good and, consequently, what constitutes a happy life.⁴ Although the Epicureans believed that philosophy should be primarily concerned with the human good, they did not shy away from pronouncing epistemological, physical and metaphysical doctrines, by adopting elements from pre-existing theories.⁵ These tenets of Epicurean epistemology and natural philosophy are presented with the ultimate purpose of lending support to the central hedonistic moral claim about pleasure and happiness. For example, Epicurus' atomism and the related views that the gods do not intervene in our world and that death is a painless state of permanent loss of perception, aim at freeing us from the fears and pain that arise from prejudices about divine intervention and punishment after death.⁶

Epicurus' presentation of the hedonistic thesis as part of a general philosophical theory conforms to a greater trend in all ancient philosophical schools. Becoming a member of Epicurus' Garden, or joining the ranks of later Epicureans in Roman times, was supposed to be, primarily, a transformative experience that altered one's daily life and led to genuine satisfaction and happiness. However, while the main goal of Epicurus' teachings was not merely 'academic', a substantial part of the Epicurean education was occupied by training in the Epicurean philosophical tenets. These were not considered just some peripheral theoretical part of the curriculum. Rather, they constituted an integral part of the life-altering craft of philosophical advice offered by Epicurus and his successors. In this respect, the Epicureans resembled the rival ancient philosophical schools, such as the Stoics and Pyrrhonian skeptics, who also advocated the view that achieving a happy life requires a general philosophical education.⁷ The main goal of this education was to remove the beliefs and values that logically contradict each other, leaving a coherent set of beliefs based on the fundamental values that constitute the person's worldview.

This extends to one's attitude towards pleasure. It is not merely that philosophy helps one reject the vulgar popular views about pleasure, which promote the wrong kinds of things. It is also a requirement for getting any benefit from the pleasures one may happen to secure. This, the ancient philosophers inform us, can only be achieved if one has the right set of mind, i.e. only if one has acquired the appropriate philosophical training. Money, fame and any sort of pleasure are useless unless one knows how they can make one happy.⁸ Even the rejection of pleasure and the adoption of an ascetic attitude are useless unless they fit a greater moral (and metaphysical) framework. Just as fasting without praying or denouncing all possessions without having faith in God are pointless acts of self-denial, for a Christian, living a simple life without realising why this is more pleasant than a life of luxury would be equally pointless from the point of view of an Epicurean.

3 The most prominent Socratic hedonists were the Cyrenaics, who adopted an extreme form of hedonism and claimed to be following Socrates in doing so (see the corresponding chapter in Irwin 2011). For a contemporary account of Socrates as a hedonist, see Taylor (1982: chs. 2, 3).

4 Unfortunately, only a few fragments survive from Epicurus' prolific writings. Most of them, including three of Epicurus' letters to his disciples and a collection of brief sayings, called the *Principal Doctrines* are preserved in their entirety by Diogenes Laertius (Diogenes Laertius 1925). The most extensive account of Epicurean epistemology, metaphysics and natural philosophy survives in Lucretius' wonderful philosophical poem *On the nature of things (De rerum natura)* (Lucretius 1924).

5 These included, among others, Democritus' atomism and Protagoras' idea on the veracity of the senses. For the atomic theory, see Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 40–41, and Lucretius, 1.503–598. The truth of all impressions, Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 23, is defended in Lucretius, 4.469–521.

6 For the Epicurean views on the gods, see Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 76–77, Lucretius 5.156–243, 1161–1225. For their views on death, see Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 2, 19–21, *Letter to Menoeceus* 124–127, Lucretius, 3.830–911.

7 Cf. the rigorous philosophical training that Plato requires from the future rulers of the state in the *Republic*.

8 See Plato's *Euthydemus* 280c–281d, *Meno* 87c–88d. For a Stoic version of this view, see Diogenes Laertius, 7.102, Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1048C.

In addition to Epicurus' original philosophical contributions in shaping the hedonistic moral theory, the most obvious reason for considering him as the spokesperson for ancient hedonism and the forefather of modern utilitarian theories is the great success of his philosophical school. Through the Hellenistic and Roman times, Epicureanism, together with Stoicism, became the two most popular philosophical theories. Roman noblemen and generals would identify themselves as followers of Epicurus and his maxim that pleasure is the good.⁹ And, despite the heavy criticism they faced for their philosophical views, individual Epicureans were generally regarded with moral approbation, and often admiration for their self-restraint and simplicity of life. As we will show, even some ideas expressed by Fathers of the Christian Church were in basic agreement with the most important of Epicurus' ideas about how a happy life should be achieved, although they would never adopt the position that pleasure is the good.

Far from advocating a life of profligacy and the pursuit of extravagant pleasures, Epicurus proposed (and practised himself) a life of simple pleasures and limited desires. The moderation and restraint of the Epicurean life earned the school its high reputation and respect among the educated class of Roman society, and contributed to its success. This might strike someone as being at odds with the hedonist position. However, according to the Epicureans, this is exactly the point that most people get wrong. If one were to take seriously the claim that pleasure is the good and that pain is evil, that is, if one were to think rationally and philosophically about what it means to adopt the belief that pleasure is the good, then one would come to realise that the best – and, in fact, the only – way to maximise one's pleasures and minimise one's pains is by limiting one's desires to the few things that can easily be attained and are necessary by nature, while rejecting all unnecessary and extravagant pleasures.¹⁰ Starting from an apparently common-sense principle, such as the goodness of pleasure, Epicureans reached the radical conclusion that we should shun most of the things we strive to attain in our everyday life: lots of money, expensive commodities, public recognition, and so on.

When it comes to offering concrete practical advice on how to address the practical concerns most people face on a daily basis, it appears that the Epicureans, Stoics and, later on, Christian Fathers, offered a very similar advice: live simply, moderately and consistently, in accordance with a core set of basic moral and metaphysical principles. Despite their philosophical difference on whether pleasure should be thought of as something good or as something indifferent, Epicureans and Stoics agreed that, among the many varied pleasures, some (those of the soul) were preferable and worthy of pursuit, while others (those of the body) were unnecessary beyond a minimum level. A similar attitude can be found also in the writings of Christian Fathers. Even asceticism, which consists in the denial of bodily pleasures, promises a fulfilling life that abounds in other, higher, pleasures of the soul.

To be sure, there are important differences among the various ancient philosophical schools and Christianity at a later stage, even if the lives they advocate were very similar. These include differences in core metaphysical beliefs, such as the contrast between Epicurean materialism and the Christian view on the immaterial and eternal character of the soul, or between the Epicurean denial of divine providence and Stoic and Christian providential theology. However, there is a basic agreement in their attitude toward counselling and practical advice. This consisted in the thought that philosophical and pastoral counselling should not merely help people cope with everyday challenges, by developing some appropriate psychological mechanisms. Rather, it should guide people to adopt the right sort of worldview and to shape their moral character in accordance with a set of core principles.

Being an Epicurean, a Stoic or a Christian involved subscribing to some metaphysical beliefs about the world, its origin and human nature, as well as a system of moral value. It also involved living a specified kind of life, with strict rules about practical matters, such as dietary habits, (e.g. Epicurean vegetarianism) or exercises aiming at eliminating emotions (in the case of the Stoics).¹¹ The central goal of such practices was the 'shaping' of one's soul and the development

9 A list of prominent Roman Epicureans appears in Brutus' presentation of Epicurean ethics in the first book of Cicero's *De finibus*.

10 On the division of pleasures, and the ways they can be maximised, see Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 127–132, Cicero, *De finibus* 1.29–32, 37–39.

11 Some of the practices adopted by the Hellenistic philosophical schools, such as the practice of poverty by the Cynics (on this, see

on a moral character. Contrary to the Kantian strict division of the moral and the non-moral prudential sphere, the ancient philosophical schools uniformly subscribed to the eudaimonistic principle that happiness is the goal of all action, and that moral virtue is the best (and, for some, the only) way to attain it.¹² Correspondingly, philosophy's purpose is to develop a person's character and, in this way, to guide one to a happy life, and not merely to work out abstract moral principles and rules.

A crucial step in the process of character-building and practical guidance through life, which ancient philosophers promised, concerns one's attitude towards pleasure. The importance of finding pleasure in the right sorts of things, and of forming one's desires accordingly, is noted by Plato and Aristotle, and plays a central role in Epicurean education.¹³ Part of the training concerns bodily pleasures and aims at the cardinal virtue of temperance. However, the most significant change with respect to one's attitude towards pleasure is not physical, but rather mental.¹⁴ As Epicurus repeatedly proclaims, the main reason for people's dissatisfaction and unhappiness is the fact that they hold false beliefs about what is valuable in life, as well as false beliefs about the gods, human nature and death.¹⁵ In this respect, Epicurus is in agreement with Plato's Socrates as well as Aristotle. In Plato's dialogues Socrates repeatedly makes the claim that ignorance is the cause of people's inability to find pleasure and lead happy lives. Aristotle, on the other hand, makes the more moderate claim that the person who has practical wisdom, *phronêsis*, will not be overcome by pleasure and led astray to immoral and eventually harmful pursuits.¹⁶

Even the Stoics, who considered bodily pleasure to be an indifferent thing, or Christian ascetics who actively shunned all bodily pleasures, have a place for higher pleasures of the mind in their moral scheme and their conception of the happy life. Moreover, the Stoics placed value in the proper selection of bodily and non-bodily pleasures, and considered such selection to be part of virtue's function, even if the pleasures themselves were indifferent for them. Far from thinking happiness and pleasure to be matters irrelevant for morality (and philosophy), the Stoics thought that selecting the right kinds of pleasures (those of the soul, rather than the body), and developing the strength of character to not be affected by the disappointments and pains that unavoidably accompany life, was an essential part of morality, and an important component of the happy life. This is a facet of Stoicism that is much more coherent with the Epicurean 'hedonism' than is usually acknowledged. It is also an aspect of pleasure that continues to play a fundamental part in the later Christian asceticism and its philosophy of happiness.

More importantly, we believe that the convergence between patristic teaching and ancient philosophy on their positive evaluation of pleasure is more than a surface similarity based on common sense. Common sense in the context of the Christian quest for salvation and otherworldly happiness would point more to the direction of the anti-pleasure rhetoric that dominated the pulpits in the past – and to some extent continues to do so today. This, in a way, is the 'safe way' to happiness: resist your urges, as they are likely to lead you astray. According to this thought, it is better to stop thinking in terms of finding ways to achieve pleasure, and obey some set rules of conduct, instead. However, there is a different way of looking at pleasure, within the same Christian soteriological context. Contrary to advocating the rejection of pleasure, wherever possible, this other view asks

Desmond 2006) or fasting by the Epicureans, also became Christian practices at a later stage. For a revealing treatment of the influence that the Stoic theory of emotions and the related practices had on Christian thought and practice, see also Sorabji (2000), especially section IV.

12 This is what Sidgwick terms 'egoistic hedonism' in his *Methods of Ethics*, contrasting it with various versions of intuitionism, including Kant's ethics of duty.

13 On the centrality of pleasure and pain in the process of habituation that leads to moral virtue and happiness, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b. As Aristotle mentions, early training in enjoying the right kinds of pleasures was also crucial in Plato's educational scheme (as presented mainly in the *Republic*).

14 On the relatively minor effect that physical pleasures and desires (should) have on our happiness, according to the Epicureans, see Cicero, *De finibus* 1.55, *Diogenes Laertius* 10.137.

15 On this, see Lucretius 6.1, who mentions that Epicurus found the flaw and unhappiness of contemporary Athenians to be their own hearts and attitudes, and not in the lack of any material possessions. On the painful and detrimental effect of false beliefs about the gods and death, see also Lucretius, 6.68, 3.830.

16 See *Protagoras* 357c, *Meno* 88d. Also see *Republic* 586d, on the most pleasant life being secured by the proper function of reason. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1152a10, where Aristotle claims that the practically wise person cannot be weak-willed (*akratês*).

people to embrace certain pleasures, as a condition for salvation. This thought, we believe, can be seen in the writings of ascetic Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church, whose ideas we discuss in the following sections.

While asceticism generally renounces immediate pleasures as guides to ‘the good life’, and embraces the values of suffering and self-denial as more reliable methods to the cultivation of virtue that is instrumental to salvation and thus the achievement of ultimate happiness, it is by no means true that asceticism denies the value of pleasures altogether or that the ascetic concepts of virtue can easily be constructed without a central role being played by pleasure. In what follows we will examine just this aspect of the ascetic Christian conceptualisation of happiness as redemption and show that on at least one interpretation (which, incidentally, is considered the ‘hard’ ascetic view), pleasure is a necessary component of ascetic happiness defined in soteriological terms. Our main focus will be on the writings of monastic leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Of course, the convergence and divergence of ancient hedonism *vis-à-vis* Christian and popular ethics has been examined by a number of philosophers and theologians, from Aquinas, to Gassendi, to Spinoza and the modern Utilitarians.¹⁷ Most of such discussions, though, remain theoretical and do not address practical issues or provide a concrete practical morality. On the other hand, the writings of monastic leaders aim at the practical everyday guidance of monks, in addition to providing a theory of happiness that is in line with theological principles. In this respect, they resemble the moral practices of the Epicurean Garden. In addition to otherworldly salvation, monastic leaders promised worldly tranquility and happiness. Achieving such tranquility was a day-to-day affair that focused around the actual and concrete desires and needs of the members of the monastic community. For this reason, we believe that the emphasis given by the monastic fathers to finding pleasure in an ascetic life exhibits in a particularly telling manner the fundamental role that conceptions of pleasure play in the quest for happiness.

Pleasure and the good life in Epicurus and Christianity

Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines* 1, 2 and 34 read:

1. A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.
2. Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us.
34. Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions.

These doctrines clearly show aspects of Epicureanism that are unacceptable from the point of view of Christian dogma and Christian ethics. Such doctrines, along with the Epicurean cosmology and atomistic metaphysics have caused its long-term rejection by Christian scholarship. There are, however, different lines in Epicurean teachings that reflect an entirely different practical relationship with later Christian ethical precepts. Also in Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines*, we read:

5. It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly.
15. The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity.

17 We are thankful to the two anonymous reviewers for suggesting a number of passages and writers that relate to our main examination of conceptions of happiness in antiquity and Christianity. Unfortunately, space does not allow for an adequate discussion of all relevant writers and passages. We hope for a more thorough discussion, which would pay attention to Christianity’s complexity and diverging views, at a future point.

There is little in these views that the Christian Fathers would have a problem with. Many views that appear in Epicurean writings show that they were far from advocating profligate lifestyles. The ‘calculus of pleasure’ of Epicurean ethics reaches the inevitable outcome that a quiet, withdrawn life amongst a small group of friends, focused on the minimum of necessary needs, is sure to result in lasting pleasure, defined predominantly as the absence of pain:

21. He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. Thus he has no longer any need of things which involve struggle.

27. Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship.

All these views highlight the similarity between the moral views of Epicureans and the Christian Fathers, although such a convergence is rarely acknowledged. Despite their metaphysical differences on the nature of God and the world, both groups highlight the importance of pleasure as a motivating force in our behaviour, the potentially destructive consequences of chasing after the wrong pleasures, and the need to orient ourselves towards what is in accordance with our natural endowments and purpose. The naturalistic attitude, which considers pleasure, and the urge to pursue it, as part of human nature and as something that needs to be perfected, rather than overcome or transcended, constitutes a deep convergence between ancient philosophy and an important, though often controversial, thought within the Christian Church.

The fundamental agreement at the level of moral theory is also reflected on a number of similar methodological approaches with respect to philosophical and pastoral counselling. Philosophical counselling focuses on the enrichment of life and, while it cannot be separated from other types of counselling bluntly, it provides a philosophically informed help to deal with ‘philosophical problems’ such as moral dilemmas or issues of the good life. Pastoral counselling is different. It is a discipline of pastoral work with parishioners that encompasses pastor–parishioner relations outside the Holy Sacraments. While the pastor will usually provide guidance to the parishioner during a confession and preparations for the Communion, the pastor will also engage in counselling on a variety of life issues. These issues do not involve the sacraments and are often provided to people who do not come to church or participate in church life, although they are generally predicated upon Christian values. Priests offer pastoral counselling to vulnerable groups such as drug addict communities or prisoners even when they are not devout Christians and do not come to church.

Before the advent of modern scientific psychology, the function of being a ‘doctor of the soul’ (literally, a psychotherapist) belonged to the priest in the Christian Western world. And the ancient predecessors of priests were the philosophers, who acted as healers of the soul by engaging in philosophical instruction and advice-giving, both publicly and privately (Sellars 2006: p. 34). Unlike psychotherapy, both philosophical and pastoral counselling are predominantly focused on ethics. While psychotherapy usually insists on politically correct concepts such as tolerance and a certain withdrawal from the adoption or advocacy of substantive values and value systems (thus allowing the client to work with their own value system), philosophical counselling narrows down the value landscape through the critical examination of the logic and consistency of beliefs. An important goal of philosophical counselling is the quest to remove the beliefs and values that contradict other more fundamental values that constitute the person’s worldview. The practical outcomes of such logical stringency in philosophical counselling usually take the form of a personal ethics in the normative sense.

Pastoral counselling is even more focused: it embraces a clearly defined set of substantive values of the faith, and works to integrate one’s faith with the normative implications of everyday situations. While psychotherapy is concerned with things such as ‘functionality’, ‘cognition’, ‘volition’ or ‘psychodynamics’ (motivations and emotions) in a morally neutral context, philosophical and pastoral counselling treat all these aspects of mental life as logical and moral ‘life forms’ of the mind. Thus, while substantive ethics applied to the client is very much

secondary in psychotherapy (and often it is not addressed at all), it is key to both philosophical and pastoral counselling. A client who emerges from successful psychotherapy may be a person without a clear and consistent morality, as long as they are cognitively agile, emotionally balanced and socially functional. One who emerges from a successful philosophical counselling by definition will be equipped with greater consistency of beliefs and thinking and with the ability to morally justify those to one's peers. A person who has received successful pastoral counselling will be able to integrate their personal morality with the ethics of their religion and thus resolve many of the emotional and philosophical dilemmas of everyday life.

When philosophical and pastoral counselling are concerned, many participants will emerge from moral confusion over life's direction and specific life challenges; they will not necessarily be deeply involved in the life of any religious community, and their religiosity may be more cultural than personal. Even the practicing members of Christian congregations may not be sufficiently accustomed to the ascetic logic and philosophy of practical life as it is embedded in the Christian dogma. The ability of counsellors and pastors to comfortably use the term 'pleasure' in its everyday meaning, whilst maintaining a firm moral framework of the counselling session, is critical to the effectiveness of such counselling. Otherwise, the counselling session is likely to quickly turn into a religious lecture with little long-lasting benefits for the sufferer.

Christian counsellors are exceptionally uncomfortable with the idea of pleasure as the key drive in everyday psychodynamics. Epicureanism may be popular nowadays, but not in Christian churches. Part of the reason for this may be the association of hedonism, including Epicurus', with the continuous and single-minded pursuit of certain kinds of bodily pleasures. This is, of course, a misrepresentation of the hedonistic theory, even though the warning against overindulgence is important. Instead, we believe that a study of Epicurean ethics is of considerable benefit didactically for pastoral counsellors. If used cautiously, Epicurean ethics, when devoid of references to what Pierre Hadot considered the 'metaphysical superstructure' of Epicureanism, can help moderate the perception of pleasures and transform the very conceptualisation of pleasure from the banal into the more subtle forms (Hadot 1995). Such transformation is at the heart of Epicureanism and bears immense practical potential to change the quality of life and contribute to a 'good life'. Pleasure in the wisdom of living, a significant part of which is the ascetic approach to everyday life, can ultimately receive the utmost normative value in practical Christian ethics. Many patristic texts clearly reflect the awareness of the Christian Fathers of this particular type of pleasure; however, its pedagogical and didactic roles have not yet been recognised in pastoral counselling.

A large part of the Christian shying away from connecting pleasure with virtue and righteousness arises from the shared modern philosophical tradition of Kantian apriorism in ethics. Kant's view, which has marked a whole era of ethical thinking, is that the full moral worth of an action is preserved only when the right action is taken more or less exclusively out of the perception of duty, and not out of any agreeable feelings that might be associated with it. This means that it may be nobler to act morally correctly when such action causes deprivation and suffering to the actor, than when acting rightly brings satisfaction and joy. The logic has been mocked by philosophers who 'apologized for finding pleasure in doing good'. Moreover, as the next section shows, the Kantian conception of morality also is in contrast to important aspects of the Christian idea of moral character, as it is expressed by theologians of the Christian East. Therefore, there are good reasons to think of the ethics of the Church Fathers as more akin to the ancient eudaimonistic model than to Kantian ethics, at least with respect to their attitude towards pleasure.¹⁸

Moral pleasure and character-building in Christian ethics

The previous point cuts deeply into the problem of the relationship between the Christian ethics and character formation. If the role of the Christian ethics is to develop virtues constitutive of a

18 It should be noted here that eudaimonism differs in content for the various ancient authors: in Aristotle eudaimonism involves a variety of values, and pleasure is only one of them. This does not principally impact our argument: ancient eudaimonism almost invariably involves pleasure, and most variations depend on which types of pleasure are considered more important. In Plato and Aristotle the good life depends more on the 'rational' than what they would consider base pleasures, and in Epicurus the view is more radical: no pleasure is bad, and every pleasure contributes to the good life, as long as it is sustainable and does not, in its ultimate consequences, lead to pain.

desirable Christian moral character, then it is to be expected that an accomplished Christian would derive intellectual and moral pleasure from acting correctly in morally challenging situations, much the same as a person with a different character would find pleasure in breaking the moral norms. There are strong dogmatic grounds in Christianity to support the integration of the idea of a specifically 'moral' pleasure playing a key role in the development of moral character as the principal criterion for salvation. This logic is clear in the Orthodox Christian doctrine of 'tollhouses' that the soul has to pass through during the first nine days after death. The doctrine is to be found in St John of Damascus and has been addressed extensively by such authoritative Orthodox Christian pastors and scholars as Bishop Ignatios Brianchaninov and Fr Seraphim Rose.

Briefly, the idea of the tollhouses consists in the following: after death the soul leaves the body and in its ascent passes through a sequence of moral trials, the outcome of which determines where its final destination in the afterlife will be. The trials, or demons, all refer to specific vices of which the soul has not fully cleansed itself in this life. At each of the stages, the soul can be snatched from the angels by the demons if it proves that the respective sin lingers on in the soul. This ensures that only those souls that have rid themselves of attraction to sin will reach the Heavenly Kingdom. This shows the instrumental value of character-building in the present life for the soteriological perspective promised to the Christians. At the same time, this is philosophically perhaps the most interesting aspect of the soteriological meaning of Christian ethics.

In a hymn attributed to St John of Damascus, the reference to the tollhouses that the soul faces after death is clear:

When my soul shall be released from the bond with the flesh, intercede for me, O Sovereign Lady (...) that I may pass unhindered through the princes of darkness in the air' and 'Grant me to pass through the noetic satraps and the tormenting aerial legions without sorrow at the time of my departure, that I may cry joyfully to Thee, O Theotokos, who heard the cry (...)'¹⁹

St Macarios of Egypt says:

When the soul of a man departs out of the body, a great mystery is there accomplished. If it is under the guilt of sins there come bands of devils, and angels of the left hand (...). If, while alive in this world, the man was subject and compliant to them, and made himself their bondsman, how much more, when he departs out of this world, is he kept down and held fast by them (Rose 1994: pp. 257–258).

One of the most well-known descriptions of the tollhouses is attributed to St Theodora of Thessaloniki and includes 29 distinct 'torments' in the order of increasing severity, corresponding to the severity of sin (Panteleimon 1996).

The doctrine of the tollhouses is essential for the understanding of the role of moral pleasure, and in fact pleasure in general, in the development of the psychodynamics of a good life in the Christian perspective. This doctrine implies that one may act in a way that is considered morally good (perhaps because of the structural violence exerted by the community, the family or what Hume appealed to as active self-interruption through self-discipline), while retaining the affinity to sin. The perspective is opposed to Kantian apriorism of duty. According to Kant, one ought to morally orient oneself in the world on the basis of duty or categorical moral demands. All moral demands are cardinal; there can be no hierarchy of moral principles, and all stem from a uniquely noumenal nature of the human person: even where one finds pleasure in doing the right thing, one ought, ideally, to do the right thing not because of the pleasure, but because acting so is a moral duty. Pleasure is irrelevant in Kant's ethics.²⁰ Hume, on the other hand, argues that the

19 Service to St John Chrysostom, Jan. 27, Canticle 5 of the Canon to the Theotokos — written by St John Damascene, according to Rose (1994: p. 252).

20 Thus Kant's famous remark in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that '(...) every admixture of incentives taken from one's own happiness is a hindrance to providing the moral law with influence on the human heart' (Kant 1996: p. 265).

development of virtues is a matter of habit, and habit arises from active self-interruption. Unless one is of an irreparably bad character to start with, one is able to develop whatever virtue one wishes to develop if one can consistently force oneself to act *as though* one has that virtue (Hume 1963: essay 18; Gould 2011).

Kantian ethics constitute a break with the ancient moral tradition, which places value not simply on being able to overcome one's desires and act according to moral imperatives, but, more importantly, on *forming the right kind of moral impulses and desires*. However, it also seems to fall short of the moral requirements for salvation outlined in the previous section. Someone who behaves morally by acting according to the Categorical Imperative, while having strong desires to do otherwise, might not qualify for redemption, according to the doctrine of tollhouses presented above. This is due to failures in the development of moral virtues and moral character, which are expressed by one's ability to actually desire to do the right thing, and find pleasure in doing so. Kantian restrictive views of morality (acting regardless of pleasure-led desires and sentiments, based on categorical moral duties alone) is also deeply problematic from the point of view of practical ethics, because it portrays as desirable a state of affairs where moral communities are inhabited by utterly unhappy people.

There are various recent interpretations of Kant that tend to see him in more conciliatory light with Epicureanism that has been traditionally thought (e.g. Fenves 2003). While Kant's writings do contain remarks that appear to support such conclusions, including his remarks on Epicurus in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we feel that the situation here is generally the same as with most other key philosophers: various interpretations of their views can be developed based on the foci of research in different periods, and Kant is not an exception. On the other hand, there are key contexts for Kant where he is starkly against eudaimonism and appears to be at odds with comments made in passing elsewhere, which seem more appreciative of Epicurus (for an overview see Fenves 2003: pp. 8–31). Kant is not a virtue ethicist, and there are many rigorist contexts where he is clearly a moral absolutist who considers duty as the paramount criterion of moral righteousness while at the same time explicitly ruling out any reference to eudaimonism. Perhaps one of the most important such contexts is his discussion of punishment and moral desert: 'Woe unto him who crawls through the windings of eudaimonism in order to discover something that releases the criminal from punishment' (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:331a). If forgiveness arising from eudaimonism, however precisely eudaimonism might be conceived, is categorically morally unacceptable, the demands of symmetrical deontological justice clearly outweigh considerations of 'the good life', which is predicated upon happiness. This then entails that a community can consistently pursue morally perfect practices whilst leading an utterly unhappy life: specifically, morality does not have any connections in principle with the good life. This is where Kantian ethics is at very stark odds with eudaimonism regardless of any passing appreciative comments that Kant made about Epicurus. The relevant question here is not whether Kant would have considered it an ideal case if one did the morally right thing and enjoyed it at the same time: the point is that in Kant's context this would merely be a fortunate coincidence; happiness and the good life are in no way morally normative in Kant.

On the other hand, in Christian ethics, it is the sensibility that makes up spiritual virtue that is the goal of this life. Thus there is a fundamental problem for Christianity with people being unhappy about acting in accordance with duty: at least on one interpretation of Christian soteriology, which we advance here, the souls of such people would likely be lost. Therefore, the Kantian view of ethics cannot be fully acceptable within the Christian moral context that the tollhouses dogma represents. In order to satisfy the soteriological demands of character development one must both do the right thing *and enjoy doing so*, namely one must liberate oneself from the desires to commit sin. This is the ultimate achievement in Christian morality and one that is tested through the tollhouses.

Emanuel Swedenborg sheds additional light on this issue through the explanation of his view that 'God casts no-one to hell' (Swedenborg 2000: ch. 57). Swedenborg argues that the testing of the soul after death ensures that each one ends up where one's affinities lead them: those who have a strong affinity to sex and extreme pleasures would simply not be happy in Heaven.

Those who find the meaning of life in the adrenaline-charged business transactions or sports may likewise belong elsewhere. However controversial his views might be for the mainstream Christian scholarship, Swedenborg illustrates a point that ought not to be so controversial: depending on the affinities developed through the character-formation that this life ultimately represents, the future destiny of the soul will be guided precisely by the affinities it has developed during life. The idea is common to the patristic theme that in order to qualify for salvation one should learn to 'lead an angelic life' here on Earth. What needs to be made explicit is that such 'angelic life' inevitably involves pleasure being found in the Christian virtues of moderation and self-denial.

It is clear from what has been said so far that such pleasures need to be learned through a process of Christian character-building, and that the tests attributed to the initial after-life experiences in fact verify the results of change of character. It is character that opens up the soteriological perspective in Christian ethics, as far as a person's own efforts are concerned. In other words, the ideal of an 'angelic life' here must be conceptualised as a 'good life' with pleasures being found in certain things rather than others, and only such a 'good life' marks one's readiness for salvation. The very phrase 'angelic life' in Swedenborg refers to what would more conventionally be considered 'holy life', the life that does not differ from the hoped-for afterlife in its values and in its intended virtue. The threshold of salvation is higher than moral duty, aprioristic self-restriction and discipline in the repetition of rationally chosen 'virtuous' actions. What is required in a Christian ethics of the good life is much the same as what Epicurean ethics suggests: recognition of pleasure as the main drive of human action, and the successful transformation of this drive from a quest of 'base' pleasures to a yearning for the quiet and ascetic life marked by peace, contemplation and attended by little disturbance by worldly concerns.

To an important extent, monastic communities function in a manner that resembles the organisation of the Epicurean Society of the Garden. Even confession is already found in the Society of the Garden: 'Heraclides is praised because he supposed the criticisms he would incur as a result of what was going to come to light were less important than the benefit he would get from them, and so informed Epicurus of his mistakes' (Philodemus 1988: p. 42). Epicurus himself died in agony, but claimed to have lived a life full of pleasure, while withdrawn from public affairs. He defended his hedonism consistently by stating that, even during his last days, the pleasures arising from conversations with friends greatly outweighed the pains of the body.

One of the key Epicurean principles of the good life was to lower the level of expectations and find pleasure in the small things that are easy to obtain, and to avoid any major ones (which Democritus had associated with 'large movements of the soul'), which are likely to cause pain in the future. Some of such pleasures invite pain arising from feelings of guilt, and the safest way to lead a pleasant life is therefore to remain within a circle of friends, learn to enjoy peace and absence of pain, avoid public life, and cultivate trust and mutual support between members of the community who share the same values. One wonders just how radically this ideal differs from that of a monastic community or that of a harmonious Christian parish.

Pleasure and happiness in philosophical and pastoral counselling

One obvious advantage of the Epicurean rhetoric of pleasure is that it is an attractive 'this-worldly' language that lends itself easily to ordinary people. At the same time, as we hope to have shown, the concept of pleasure is not only consistent with Christian ethics, but is in fact logically required when Christian ethics is seen in light of its soteriological context. We have placed this argument in the context of Orthodox Christian teachings, but it is essentially the same in Western Christianity as well.

It could, of course, be argued that common patterns in the conceptualisation of pleasure and virtue between the ancient philosophers and the Christian Fathers do not necessarily mean that differences in religious practice within the various Christian denominations do not carry important different value commitments that make them different from the ancient views. There are important dogmatic differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, especially when the Holy Sacraments are concerned. However, it should be noted that there is very little difference in Christian ethics between the Christian East and the Christian West; in fact, the

concept of Christian virtue is probably the most consistent and unifying between the two Christian traditions. Our argument here does not engage in an exegetic exploration of the two traditions, but seeks to identify and elaborate those common threads in the field of Christian ethics that, given the soteriological context of Christianity (which is clearly the same for both Eastern and Western Christianity), may be interpreted as necessary conditions for redemption. The concept of this-worldly virtue that qualifies the Christian for the blessed afterlife ('angelic life' in Swedenborg's words) is both common to Eastern and Western Christian ethics and is a logical pre-condition for redemption. While the doctrine of the tollhouses, which is discussed in this article, is not explicitly shared by the Roman Catholic and certainly not by Protestant theology, the principles that this doctrine illustrates are shared: this life's main spiritual value is that it is an opportunity to develop the type of virtues and sensibilities that will qualify the soul for the eternal afterlife. Correspondingly, the spiritual 'fall' from grace is in fact failure to develop such Christian virtue. It is this aspect of both Christian soteriology and Christian ethics, we argue, that shows clear continuity with the ancient Greek philosophical schools, which first developed the concept of refined pleasures associated with virtues that make up 'the good life'.

On a practical level, the value of the language of pleasure for philosophical and pastoral counselling arises from the intuitive nature of the Epicurean idea that all men seek pleasure and avoid pain. Starting from such an intuitive premise allows the counsellor to work with the common prejudices and problems that the counsellee brings to the session with greater ease and with less resistance by the client than if the counsellor starts from a 'moral distance'. While both philosophical and Christian counselling ultimately aim at assisting the counsellee to progress towards a good life, or happiness, philosophical counselling often has more limited immediate tasks, such as sharpening the counsellee's reasoning or argumentative logic. Christian counselling, on the other hand, tends to assume more ambitious goals from the start: it attempts to influence the counsellee's values more or less directly. For both types of counselling, however, the introduction of pleasure early on in the process helps influence the counsellee's value-judgments. In a world where pleasures are associated with pornography, sadism and legal destruction of the family, where television shows routinely depict dismembered bodies on forensic tables and the idea of killing animals for food often incites greater moral resistance than the idea of killing human beings (the latter being the subject of much popular entertainment), it is essential to work on a transformation of the concept of acceptable pleasure from the very start of pastoral counselling. Renouncing pleasure altogether in the name of an abstract 'asceticism' is likely to produce a strong ricochet effect: a relapse into the popular perceptions of pleasure as something fundamentally *opposed to* Christian ethics and the Christian way of life.

One good example of how the transformation of pleasures works relates to an exceedingly common problem in both philosophical and pastoral counselling, namely that of a deficit of self-esteem and the resulting mood issues. Self-esteem is a significant source of satisfaction in modern society, where it arises from external approval and the fulfillment of performance criteria dictated from the outside that have been internalised as self-expectations. Self-esteem is an important source of pleasure in the modern society, apart from being a prerequisite for a whole range of professional, personal and social activities. As a source of pleasure, the feeling of self-esteem should belong to the category of self-sustaining higher pleasures: it is continuous and can be easily sustained, once we have reached a certain level of achievement, without the need of anything external. Moreover, it can add to the pleasantness of other activities, such as friendly or romantic interactions, professional engagement, and even athletic or intellectual activities. The lack of self-esteem, correspondingly, can lead to unpleasant and even painful feelings.

Problems with self-esteem thus translate into a sense of deprivation that could be linked to clinical issues such as depression. However, it is worth noting that a deficit of self-esteem will arise only in relation to goals that the person has internalised, not just from any failure to measure up to someone else. As Alain de Botton pointed out, one will not experience a crisis of self-esteem because one cannot dance as well as somebody else or because one cannot fly a plane, unless someone has already set these things as one's goals and has worked to achieve them (de Botton 2004: pp. 112–120). On the other hand, even in things seemingly unnoticeable to others, such as

specific social skills or conversational habits, one might experience a lack of self-esteem if one has tried to improve without success, while somebody else, especially if this is a Significant Other (family member, colleague at work or close friend) has achieved the same goal with the same or less effort. Bottom points to William James' formula of self-esteem (James 2007: p. 310):

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \text{Success/Pretensions}$$

The problem arises when the specific elements of this equation are considered separately. Success in various endeavours obviously depends in part on the resources available. However much resolve one might have to achieve a goal, if resources are inadequate the result will inevitably be difficult to achieve. Modern societies have provided far greater opulence of resources than was the case throughout earlier history, and this would suggest that people's self-esteem should increase because their success has multiplied in most areas of life. However, the current epidemic of crises of self-esteem is caused by the much greater increase in the pretensions, or size of goals, imposed by the society. The increase in the resources to achieve certain things has been dwarfed by the increase in expectations of achievement. The 'mathematical' result of such quantitative changes in the elements of the equation has led to a true crisis of self-esteem and the resulting mass problems with anxiety and depression. The pharmaceutical industry has eagerly tapped into this structural problem to temporarily 'fix' the subjective side of self-esteem, while leaving the entire causal structure untouched, thus being able to capitalise on a steady and increasing demand for temporary and sometimes damaging 'quick fixes'.²¹

One way of resolving this issue on a structural level that is peculiar to Christian ethics would run contrary to the dominant modern cultural trends: rather than trying to catch up with the ever-increasing expectations and to muster a maximum of resources to do so, one might consider reducing self-expectations and learning to find pleasure in the existing successes. This will automatically lead to increased self-esteem. However, the policy requires at least two preconditions. The first is a selection of needs (similar to the Epicurean reduction from 'all natural needs' to just 'necessary needs'). This is a first step that introduces a cultural distance to the mainstream community. The second precondition is the existence of an 'organic community' that will support such lowered standards of expectation and a different, more ascetic approach to both aspirations and needs. Such a community will largely differ in its values from the mainstream, as the Epicurean Society of the Garden did, and as the contemporary well-integrated parish communities often do. The example, of course, is particularly starkly illustrated in the Christian monasteries, where this distance from 'the world' is so clearly emphasised. According to St Gregory the Theologian, the pleasure arising from the 'absence of all worries when living a quiet life' is 'more precious than the glory of public office'. Saint Isidore of Pellusium writes 'the person who moves in a crowd, while seeking to know what is of the Heaven, must have forgot that whatever is sown among the thorns will be choked by the thorns, and that a person who has not found pleasure in a rest from the everything of this world cannot know God' (Turner 1905: p. 75). This is the same sentiment that has been repeated many times in patristic literature in favour of 'pleasures of the monastic life' that make it easier to cultivate a character required for redemption. Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite specifically speaks about monastic life making it possible for monks to find *pleasure in asceticism* more easily than people who live in the world. There is no difference in the requirement to achieve pleasure in the Christian virtues; the only difference is in the comparative ease with which this is achieved through monastic, as opposed to worldly, life (Nicodemus 1989: pp. 28–32).²²

A shift in the concepts of pleasure as a prerequisite for the achievement of a 'good life' was a common precept in Ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle argued that the intellectual pleasures

21 We are not suggesting here that there are no mental states or mental health issues where psychotropic medication is indeed required. Likewise, we are not saying that all issues of anxiety and depression are caused by the lack of self-esteem. What we do suggest, however, is that a large proportion of such cases is caused by the described structural factors, and that the use of medication in such cases is not only unsuccessful in the long term, but that it is both cynically opportunistic on the part of the 'Big Pharma', and that it actually makes the structural situation considerably worse.

22 Saint Nicodemus is the author of the Orthodox version of the seminar work on asceticism, 'Unseen Warfare', from the Venetian original written by the Catholic author Lorenzo Scupoli. He was canonised in 1955.

are nobler than the pleasures arising from victory at war or from success in sports. However, the Epicureans were probably the first ones to recommend such ‘ascetic’ pleasures to everyone as a way to avoid anguish, guilt and fear, and to live a happier and more peaceful life. This is why Epicurean ethics is so close to practical Christian ethics even today, and especially why it is potentially so useful for pastoral counselling. Its fundamental precept is that reducing the expectation of pleasure will in fact lead to an increased pleasure perceived as an absence of pain and a peace of mind, because in the long term the harms and adverse events arising from the pursuit of more ‘full blooded’ or extreme pleasures are likely to be avoided. Such negative events detract from the overall amount of satisfaction in life, thus lowering the sum of pleasure previously increased by extreme pleasures. Not just moderation, but asceticism in the proper sense is thus the Epicurean way to a maximisation of minimalist, yet sustained, pleasures throughout one’s lifetime. Lowering what could be considered inauthentic aspirations and personal goals in a perspective of ascetic character-building envisaged by the Christian soteriological perspective can be considerably facilitated by an initial adoption of Epicurean views on the pleasure, followed by a closer instruction in Christian ethics and dogma.

Finally, an important clarification is in order. The concept of sustained pleasure as it is advanced by Orthodox Christian Fathers is by no means the same as the doctrine of moderation or the idea that various aprioristic and eudaimonistic concepts and principles should play different roles in what is essentially a practical view of the good life (‘the middle axioms’ etc.) The Orthodox Fathers do not suggest that enjoying life in moderation is prudent because it allows us to avoid the problems of excess. The Christian view of pleasure, as they espouse it, is that duty and social expectations cannot be separated from the development of particular sensibilities that will incline us to pursue virtue rather than immoral pleasures. In modern philosophy, this thought has been presented by David Hume: discipline and self-interruption are there only to help people cultivate spontaneous dispositions to act morally and to find pleasure in doing so. For Hume the two main tools in the development of virtue, ‘study’ and ‘application’, are merely instruments for the achievement of a virtuous sensibility. This is why he, in line with the pastoral counselling practice, assumes that in order to develop virtuous sensibility one must be ‘reasonably virtuous’ to start with. ‘Where one is born of so perverse a frame of mind, and of so callous and insensible a disposition, as to have no relish for virtue (...) such a one must be allowed entirely incurable, nor is there any remedy in philosophy’ (Hume 1963: p. 172). This view, shared with Christian ethics, does not allow the enjoyment of immoral pleasures in moderation. The pleasure and minimalism involved in the cultivation of virtue are intended to build character and set the person apart from the temptations of the present in the name of a soteriological hope for afterlife. Asceticism aims at cultivating such sensibilities and attitudes towards pleasure with a view to the afterlife, rather than merely detracting from or adding to a ‘balance of pleasures’ in this world. The perspective of Christian asceticism is individualistic: if a soul is redeemed because it finds pleasure in the holy things, the ultimate Christian aim is achieved. Whether the amount of pleasure in the world, which includes both such spiritual pleasures and other types of pleasure, is also increased or decreased is fundamentally irrelevant.

Conclusion

Our discussion of pleasure as a key component of happiness and moral progress, in two seemingly opposed contexts, shows that developing the right conception of pleasure is crucial both in describing the happy life and in helping people attain it. This conclusion seems to be valid across various moral, metaphysical or theological backgrounds. Educating people to find pleasure in the right kinds of things and care less for pleasures that are either harmful or hard to come by can work equally well for a philosophical hedonist such as Epicurus, for a Christian or for a philosophical counsellor. The reason for this is that our attachment to pleasure and its importance for how we plan and evaluate our lives is evident and cannot be ignored, regardless of one’s theoretical commitments. The shift in perceptions of pleasure that is requisite for the good life, from extreme to contemplative, and from competitive to minimalist, is in fact a proper Christian ‘cultural policy’ that is based on a special concept of the good life. The context for the

achievement of this goal is a Christian community, which shapes both its members' perceptions of pleasure and the expectations that determine their sense of individual achievement and self-esteem. Some aspects of Epicurean ethics could be used as a component of the Christian community's pastoral method, without subscribing to the central Epicurean thesis that pleasure is the highest good. The use of Epicurean language and the inclusion of a conception of pleasure in pastoral counselling may help address the mass crisis in mood and belief. At the same time, Christian pastors and Christian scholarship could draw on the philosophical tradition of Ancient Greece, in order to design tools for counselling the increasingly unhappy modern man.

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