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Sex Within the Epicurean Good Life

Experiencing a “good life” infused with tranquility is a topic of discussion ancient Greek philosophers were highly interested in. Although we sometimes use different terms, this quest for the good life is firmly embedded into our modern lives as well. It is a question that cannot go out of date, so long as we value feeling good. Another topic that will not go out of date, so long as humans naturally procreate, is sex. Indeed, sex is consistently mentioned within ancient Greek philosophical texts. One of the ancient Greeks, Epicurus, offered a sort of tempered hedonism on the path to *ataraxia* (tranquility). In short, Epicureanism advocates for seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. In the process, Epicurus divides pleasure and the means of achieving it into several categories, which have a hierarchy. Additionally, he offers specific suggestions as to how one can best avoid pain and experience pleasure, including suggestions related to sex. Although the evidence about Epicurus’s attitudes toward sex provides, at times, ambiguous messages, his stance is likely cautionary. However, using current scientific findings on the effects of sex, it becomes clear that in certain contexts, sex has several clear benefits. These benefits fit within the goals and values of Epicureanism. Therefore, Epicurus should have reconsidered his cautionary stance on sex in order to maintain consistency with his other beliefs and values.

The most basic cornerstone of Epicurean philosophy is that one should avoid pain and seek pleasure, as Tim O’Keefe (professor at Georgia State University) explains in his report on Epicurus’s teachings in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. O’Keefe goes on to explain that this does not mean that all immediately pleasurable activities should be indulged in, nor does it mean that all pain is bad. The pursuit of long-term pleasure is more important to Epicurus than short-term gratification: even if an activity is pleasurable in the moment, if it will cause pain in the future, then it should be avoided. Similarly, if an activity will cause more sustained pleasure in the future, it should be endured even if it is painful in the meantime. It should also be recognized that not all pleasures are held to the same esteem.

Epicurus divided pleasures into categories based on degrees of necessity and “naturalness” (O’Keefe). First, there are natural and necessary pleasures. These are pleasures that exist in the natural world and will inherently produce pain if they are not fulfilled, such as hydration and eating for sustenance. We should always seek to experience these pleasures; they are an integral part of a good life because they are very difficult to eliminate. They are also easy to fulfill as long as one’s survival is not in danger. Next, there are natural but unnecessary desires, such as eating particularly good food and engaging in sex for pleasure. One should not entirely scorn these pleasures but should be very wary of becoming dependent on them. Finally, there are pleasures that are neither natural nor necessary. O’Keefe describes these pleasures as “vain and empty.” These pleasures have simply been constructed by a culture and are seemingly insatiable. They include the desire for riches and power. These pleasures should not be pursued.

Epicurus may have also divided pleasures into categories based on how they are experienced as well (O’Keefe). Kinetic pleasures come from the act of satisfying a desire, and usually involves engaging the senses. Static pleasure is a state of being in which our desires are already satiated. This state of being in which no desires are unfulfilled is better than kinetic pleasure. Considering this, as O’Keefe explains,

If pleasure results from getting what you want (desire-satisfaction) and pain from not getting what you want (desire-frustration), then there are two strategies you can pursue with respect to any given desire: you can either strive to fulfill the desire, or you can try to eliminate the desire. For the most part Epicurus advocates the second strategy, that of paring your desires down to a minimum core, which are then easily satisfied. (O’Keefe)

Epicurus does not entirely condemn the pursuit kinetic pleasures (particularly natural ones), but unnecessary kinetic pleasures should not be the main means of satisfaction.

While it is customary to accept that Epicurus categorized pleasure as kinetic or static, in an article by faculty member at Russian State University for the Humanities, Boris Nikolsky, for *Phronesis*, he suggests that Epicurus himself never used these categories and may have thought of pleasure as one unified experience. The idea that he split it into “static” and “kinetic” comes in part from Cicero’s writings on Epicurus’s teachings, which state that Epicurus considers static pleasures to be the ultimate pleasures (Cicero’s *De Fin* 1.37-9, as mentioned in Boris 443). However, according to Boris, Epicurus never actually mentions static and kinetic pleasures in his surviving writings. To muddy the waters further, as Boris points out that Cicero gives a quotation that (in Boris’s words), “Epicurus states that he cannot think of any other good than pleasures related to gustatory, auditory, visual or sexual sensations, i.e. pleasures which are on the traditional interpretation regarded as kinetic” (444). In this case, if Epicurus even did divide pleasures as static or kinetic, it is unclear whether he really did hold static pleasures as entirely supreme. That said, for this essay, I will adhere to the traditional view of Epicurus’s teachings, using both divisions of pleasure based on degrees of natural/necessary and based on whether they are static or kinetic. I will also maintain that Epicurus considered static pleasures as superior. If Epicurus did hold kinetic pleasures, including sexual pleasures, to high esteem, then this essay is simply a support of his existing views.

Based on his foundational teachings, Epicurus gives specific suggestions, including about sex. There are accounts in which Epicurus directly addresses sex, although these are also somewhat unclear and contested. In his article for *Classical Philology,* Tad Brennan explains that in D.L. 10.118 Epicurus is quoted as saying, “They say that sex is never beneficial, and you are very lucky (or, ‘it is surprising,’ or ‘it is marvellous’) if it does not do harm as well.” However, as Brennan explains, there is some controversy over whether Epicurus actually said, “[They] say that sex never benefits, but it *is* desirable, provided that it does not harm.” After thorough research involving translations of other texts from Greek to English, Brennan concludes that the former translation is indeed correct. Therefore, this provides direct evidence that not only did Epicurus consider sex a natural but unnecessary pleasure, and thus to be indulged in sparingly, but Epicurus may have indeed strongly advised against sex.

However, of course, sex is usually necessary for the continuation of the species, and this was certainly the case in Epicurus’s time. As Brennan explains, Epicurus did condone child rearing for some Epicureans (Brennan 349-350). However, this was the exception, not the rule. It is unclear why he made this exception at the specific times he did, but it is safe to say that occasional sex for the purposes of procreation would be considered a necessary and natural pleasure, not an unnecessary pleasure.

Regardless of the specific categorizations of pleasure and lifestyle suggestions of Epicurus, his core values and beliefs come through clearly: sustained pleasure throughout one’s life is key to *ataraxia*. Physical and mental well-being undeniably play a role in this. Sex may play a role in maintaining one’s bodily and mental health.

It is important to note that not everyone considers sex pleasurable and desirable. For example, some people identify as asexual and do not experience sexual attraction. For those who do experience sexual attraction, the sex must be consensual in order for it to be enjoyed and not result in trauma. Others may be in recovery from sexual assault and sexual contact brings up emotions resulting from that trauma. Clearly, sex is a complex and individual experience. While discussions on the effects of sex within the aforementioned contexts are highly important, they are beyond the scope of this essay. This essay will work within the realm of people who desire to have sex and are consenting to it at the time. It is also important to note that definitions of sex are not always consistent. What exactly is meant by it will be specified when possible as each piece of evidence is presented.

There is evidence obtained through scientific studies that sex can contribute to physical well-being. For instance, there is evidence that it supports cardiovascular health, specifically in older populations, which is important, as this is when cardiovascular health tends to decline. In a 2016 study by Liu, Waite, and Shen, participants self-reported their sexual frequency and sexual quality within partnered sex. The inclusion of sexual quality allowed the authors to integrate the social and physical aspects of sex. They then correlated this information with data on the cardiovascular risk of the subjects, which includes hypertension, rapid heart rate, elevated CRP (a protein found in blood plasma that indicates inflammation) and cardiovascular events (incidences that may cause damage to the heart, such as a heart attack). They found that men who had sex more frequently were more protected from cardiovascular risks. Women were protected from cardiovascular risk who reported a high quality of sex, but not those who reported simply a higher frequency. Whether from sexual frequency or from sexual quality, clearly sex is providing cardiovascular benefits. The authors of this study explain that this could be because sexual activity is very comparable to exercise and thus provides several of the same benefits. They also add that partnered sex comes along with a sexual relationship, which can provide emotional support.

Lowered cardiovascular risk is not the only benefit of sex for men. There is also evidence that a higher frequency of ejaculation in those with male genitalia is correlated with a lowered risk of prostate cancer. In a study published in *European Urology*, 31,925 men were periodically surveyed on their monthly ejaculation frequency for over a decade (Rider, et al.). Thus, data was collected from the same men throughout their lives. A trend of higher ejaculation frequency was associated with lower incidence of prostate cancer, which is especially significant since there are few known factors that reduce the risk of prostate cancer (Rider, et al.).

Both for those with male genitalia and female genitalia, sex may also boost the immune system. In a 2004 study by Charnetski and Brennan, they surveyed 112 college students about how frequently they had “sexual encounters.” They then collected samples of the students’ saliva and tested the levels of salivary immunoglobulin A, which is an antibody involved in mucosal immunity. Those who had reported a higher frequency of sexual activity had higher levels of immunoglobulin A (Charnetski and Brennan).

Sex may also have psychological benefits. This was indicated in the aforementioned study on cardiovascular health: partnered sex is often accompanied by intimacy and emotional support, which is part of a physically and mentally healthy life. There is also evidence that sex reduces our stress response. In a 2019 study by Ditzen, et al., 183 couples were assigned to three groups: with the female partner only, male partner only, or both partners. All groups were put in a state of stress. The behavior of the subjects was videotaped to assess their behavior and saliva was sampled throughout the test. They found that, in the group with both partners, couples that displayed intimacy between the two people recovered more quickly from the release of cortisol, which is to say that they had a shorter stress response. The only people this was not true for was women who were taking oral contraception. While these findings applied to intimacy as a broad category, the effects are likely applicable to displays of intimacy within a sexual context as well.

Granted, all of these effects are the result of kinetic pleasure, which (if it was indeed a consideration of Epicurus) is likely inferior to static pleasure. However, Epicurus was not entirely against kinetic pleasures. Furthermore, the physical impacts of cardiovascular disease, prostate cancer, the host of diseases that may result from low levels of mucosal antibodies, and prolonged exposure to cortisol would most certainly be considered forms of pain. Additionally, heightened cortisol is not just a physical pain, but also has very direct mental implications. Plus, now that we know more about how the human body works, it is clear that our physical state of being and mental state of being cannot ever be fully separated. Epicurus believed that mental pains are generally worse than physical pains and should be avoided more strongly. Thus, especially considering that sex may alleviate mental pain, it would go against Epicurus’s most basic principle of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain if one were to avoid sex altogether when they find it desirable, especially if it is in the context of emotional intimacy.

Beyond the scientific evidence that sex has physical and mental benefits, it is worth pointing out that sex also often just feels good. Based on anecdotal evidence, many people would report that it provides benefits. It is surprising that, even in Epicurus’s time, it was not common knowledge that, within the right circumstances and barring addiction-like behavior, sex brings pleasure and alleviates pain.

That said, the context of the sex is important. It is still possible for sex to do physical and/or emotional harm. In the physical realm, the most obvious possible physical harm is the transfer of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The effects of STDs may range from discomfort and embarrassment to death. In the psychological realm, the context of sex may make a difference. For example, in a 2017 study by Dubé, Lavoie, Blais, and Hébert for *Journal of Sex Research*, they looked at the effects of friends with benefits (FWBs) and one-night-stands (ONSs) amongst adolescents age 14 to 19. The subjects included those of various national backgrounds and sexual orientations (although most were Canadian born and heterosexual), and was approximately 60% boys and 40% girls. They found that engaging in FWBs and ONSs correlated with a slight increase of psychological distress and drug use for girls across the population but not for boys. This occurred whether or not the sexual contact was penetrative. However, the authors of this study pointed out that there could be many explanations for these results. In addition, previous studies on casual sexual relationships and experiences amongst other populations, including adults, have produced inconsistent results. Thus, it is unclear whether sex outside of supportive relationships is inherently harmful, but it is clear that the emotional support that comes from truly intimate sex may produce benefits.

Considering all of this information, it is still reasonable to categorize sex beyond procreation as a natural and unnecessary pleasure, as it is not necessary for an individual to survive. However, it seems that within the realm of natural and unnecessary pleasures, whether the activity will produce future pleasure or pain is a game of probability. Some activities, such as sex, can lead to both pain and pleasure, so one with an Epicurean mindset would have to weigh the odds in order to decide whether the pleasure or pain is more likely. That said, considering this evidence, it is clear that sex outside of procreation can produce pleasure. In certain contexts, this may be by far the more likely outcome. Thus, in order to stay consistent with his own doctrines, Epicurus would not be able to maintain that sex should be avoided due to it being more likely to cause pain.

In their 2008 article for *Journal of Happiness Studies,* Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer bring up two fundamental problems with Epicurus’s allegedly ridged view on sex: it limits autonomy and works under the assumption that will power is an infinite resource. They point out that it is widely recognized within the psychological community that happiness (which, if it was not the main goal of Epicureanism, it at least closely related to its goal) is enhanced by a sense of freedom and autonomy. By strictly advising against sexual relations outside of minimum procreation, this limits one’s autonomy. In addition, sex is something that many people desire and, like resisting any desire, it takes willpower to overcome it. There is also significant psychological research that suggests that willpower is not an infinite resource; it can get “worn out” after awhile. Thus, consistently having to resist temptation may not be entirely sustainable (Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer).

Considering that sex is a highly personal and varied act, perhaps it would have been better if Epicurus had allowed more room experimentation in his teachings. In some ways, sex is different than other natural and unnecessary pleasures because it often involves another person. Every relationship is unique; thus, every sexual encounter with a different person is unique. As stated above, sex is likely not inherently bad for one’s physical or mental well-being; on the contrary, it may be good for us. However, some of those benefits come with the emotionally supportive and stable relationship sex is taken place within. Therefore, someone could experience emotional pain from sex if it is taking place within an unsupportive relationship, while experiencing great emotional pleasure within a supportive relationship. It seems that there are endless factors that influence one’s sexual experience. Thus, in order to glean the benefits from pleasurable sex, some experimentation is necessary, which has the added bonus of supporting one’s autonomy. Then, one can find for themselves how sex may support or degrade their sustained pleasure, even as they attempt to adhere to Epicurean doctrines.

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