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Toward an Epicurean Mechanics of (Painful) Boredom

The Epicureans are hedonists who think that pleasure is the only intrinsic good. They are also egoists who think that only one's own interests matter ultimately, although they concede that we should often make sacrifices on the behalf of others. Together, the Epicureans' hedonism and egoism entail that only one's own pleasure is worthwhile for its own sake. Other things can be worthwhile, but only for the sake of one's own pleasure. At the same time, the Epicureans also argue that tranquility, i.e., freedom from bodily and mental pain, is the limit of pleasure. What they mean is that once we achieve tranquility, our lives become maximally pleasant. Once we eliminate all bodily and mental pain, there is no other pleasure to pursue. Since pleasure is the good and something is only worthwhile when it is for the good, it follows that nothing is worthwhile to those who have achieved tranquility. I call this the Nothing is Worthwhile to the Tranquil (NWT) problem for Epicureanism. NWT poses deep problems for the Epicureans. After all, if nothing is worthwhile to the tranquil, then those who have achieved the telos have no reasons to do anything at all, or even go on living. In a forthcoming paper, I argue that the Epicureans can avoid NWT by positing boredom as a mental pain. If boredom is a mental pain, then various goods and activities can be worthwhile to the extent that they prevent the tranquil from experiencing a pain that they counterfactually would feel without these goods or activities. I call this the Painful Boredom Prevention (PBP) solution to NWT. On PBP, various goods and activities are hedonically worthwhile even for one to whom no further pleasure is available because they prevent one from experiencing painful boredom that would result without them.

This paper develops the Epicurean account of boredom that PBP needs to succeed. First, I explain some conditions that an Epicurean account must satisfy in order for PBP to solve NWT. Since the Epicureans are atomists, PBP requires boredom to be a physical condition of one's atomic nature.

Since the Epicureans are hedonists, PBP requires boredom to be a condition that either is itself painful or causes pain. Second, I survey philosophical accounts of the nature of boredom in order to determine which of them can satisfy these two conditions. Since the atomists consider pleasure to consist in the smooth motion of one's constituent atoms, pain must somehow involve the absence of smooth atomic motion. I cash this out by arguing that Epicurean boredom results from a lack of activity that stimulates the smooth motion of one's constituent atoms. On this picture, boredom sets in when the motion of our constituent atoms becomes rough or erratic due to a lack of provocation, which results in the phenomenal feeling of pain. I then consider some objections against the Epicurean account of pain I develop and respond to them.