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THE CYRENAICS ON PLEASURE, HAPPINESS, AND FUTURE-CONCERN *Tim O’Keefe, University of Minnesota at Morris*

ABSTRACT: The Cyrenaics assert that (1) particular pleasure is the highest good, and happiness is valued not for its own sake, but only for the sake of the particular pleasures that compose it; (2) we should not forego present pleasures for the sake of obtaining greater pleasure in the future. Their anti-eudaimonism and lack of future-concern do not follow from their hedonism, nor from their “maximizing model of rationality” (*contra* Annas), since the natural position to adopt if one has a ‘maximizing’ hedonism is Socrates’ prudent hedonism, as described in the *Protagoras*. So why do they assert (1) and (2)? After reviewing and criticizing the proposals put forward by Irwin and Tsouana, I offer two possible reconstructions. In the first, I explain claim (1) as follows: happiness has no value above and beyond the value of the particular pleasures that compose it. Also, there is no “structure” to happiness. The Cyrenaics are targeting the thesis that happiness involves having the activities of one’s life forming an organized whole, the value of which cannot be reduced to the value of the experiences within that life. I explain claim (2) as follows: a maximally pleasant life is valuable, but the best way to achieve it is to concentrate heedlessly on the present. In the second reconstruction, the good is radically relativized to one’s present preferences. The Cyrenaics assert that we desire some *particular* pleasure, *e.g.*, the pleasure that results from having this drink *now*. Thus, our *telos*—which is based upon our desires—is this *particular* pleasure, not (generic) ‘pleasure’ or the maximization of pleasure over our lifetime. As our desires change, so does our *telos*. I conclude that the scanty texts we have do not allow us to decide conclusively between these reconstructions, but I give some reasons to support the second over the first.

1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of Cyrenaic ethics is their assertion that ‘particular pleasure,’ and *not* happiness, is the highest good. Almost all other ancient ethicists assert that happiness is the highest good, but disagree about what happiness is. The Cyrenaics, however, say that particular pleasures are valued for their own sakes. Happiness, the sum of all these particular pleasures, is choiceworthy only because of particular pleasure.¹

Another striking feature of Cyrenaic ethics is its lack of future-concern. The Cyrenaics advocate pursuing whatever brings pleasure *now*, enjoying that pleasure, and not worrying about the future.² Although the Cyrenaics say prudence is valuable for attaining pleasure,³ they are unconcerned with deferring present pleasures (or undergoing present pains) for the sake of experiencing greater pleasure (or avoiding greater pains) in the future. Only the experience of present pleasure has intrinsic value; anticipation of future

¹ DL ii 87-88. Text [A] in the appendix.

² DL ii 66. Text [B] in the appendix. Also see Xenophon *Memorabilia* ii 1.

³ DL ii 91

pleasure and memory of past pleasure are without value.⁴ Undergoing pains for the sake of happiness (that is, for the accumulation of future pleasures) is 'most disagreeable.'⁵

So, we can raise the following two sets of questions about the Cyrenaics: (1) When they say that particular pleasure, rather than happiness, is the *telos*, and that happiness is valued because of particular pleasures, what do they mean? Additionally, what are their reasons for this position? (2) Why do they reject planning for the future, and foregoing present pleasures or undergoing present pain for the sake of future pleasure? This seems like a good strategy for leading an *unpleasant* life. If I blow all of my money jetting off to Vegas and indulging in drinking bouts, gambling, orgies, and enjoying fish,⁶ then I'll probably end up on the street impoverished, hungry, and ill.⁷

First, I'll set out and criticize how Annas, Irwin and Tsouna respond to these questions. Then I'll advance my positive suggestions about the Cyrenaics, offering two alternative reconstructions of their position. Finally, I will compare the merits of these two reconstructions.

2. Annas: Happiness versus maximizing models of rationality

According to Annas, the entry point for ethical inquiry in ancient Greece is reflecting on one's life as a whole and asking whether it is satisfactory. (Annas (1993) p. pp. 27-29) The Cyrenaics are the only clear exception to this consensus, says Annas, and their anti-eudaimonism is the direct result of having a "maximizing model of rationality."

⁴ Athenaeus, *Deipn.* xii 544a ff. Text [C] in the appendix.

⁵ DL ii 89-90. Text [D] in the appendix.

⁶ Cf. *Ep. Men* 132.

⁷ When I speak of the Cyrenaics' 'lack of future-concern,' it is this sort of disregard for the future that I have in mind, a rejection of the prudent hedonism of the type advocated by Epicurus and Socrates in the *Protagoras*. Aristippus says that the expectation of future pleasures is "nothing to him." I will be discussing what exactly this might mean, but it *cannot* mean that one has no care about anything that extends beyond the present temporal point that one inhabits. After all, even a simple action like reaching for a glass of water in front of oneself to satisfy thirst involves a concern for a future state of affairs, albeit only a few seconds hence. Desire is almost always an intentional state regarding expected future satisfactions. Even on the most restrictive interpretation of the Cyrenaics' concentration on only the present, it must at least involve something like William James' 'specious present.' (James, (1890) pp. 608-609) (I say that desire *almost* always involves future satisfaction because there can be backward-looking desires in cases of ignorance. For example, if a hurricane were to hit the Florida coastline, near where my

(Annas (1993) pp. 38, 447) That is, instead of starting off by trying to make sense of one's life as a whole, the Cyrenaics think that the rational course of action is the one that has the best consequences, which they identify as the one that produces the most pleasure for oneself. Annas says that the Cyrenaics "reject eudaimonism because their final end is getting pleasant experiences." (Annas (1993) p. 236)

However, I think that neither their anti-eudaimonism, nor their lack of future-concern, follow directly from their hedonism.⁸ If episodes of experiencing pleasure are the highest good,⁹ and happiness is the sum of these experiences over your life, then it seems that you *would* want to have as happy—*i. e.*, as pleasant—a life as possible. Furthermore, you would not desire a maximally pleasant life as an *instrumental* good—instead, you would desire it for its own sake. And if you want to maximize the pleasure in your life, the natural position to adopt is Socrates' prudent hedonism, as described in the *Protagoras*. Socrates advocates using a 'measuring art' to weigh equally all of your pleasures and pains. Although present pleasures might seem more alluring than distant ones, Socrates maintains that this is like an optical illusion in which nearer objects seem larger than distant ones, and that you must correct for this distortion in order to plan your life rationally.¹⁰ Simply indulging in whatever pleasures are close at hand, as the Cyrenaics recommend, will ultimately cause greater pain.

parents live, and I heard that many people died, I may form a desire *that my parents were not killed by the hurricane.*)

⁸ For attributions of hedonism to the Cyrenaics, see DL ii 87, among many other places. Nor does the Cyrenaics' anti-eudaimonism follow from their notorious privileging of bodily over mental pleasures (DL ii 90, among other places), or their conception of pleasure and pain as 'movements' that we experience. I will not argue explicitly for that point here, but notice that in the argument that follows for why their anti-eudaimonism and lack of future-concern do not follow from their hedonism, the experiences of future pleasures and pains that I mention are all bodily.

⁹ I say "episodes of experiencing pleasure" because the Cyrenaics affirm that pleasure is a 'movement' which we experience, and that mere absence of pain does not count as pleasure. (DL ii 89)

¹⁰ *Protagoras* 356a-e. For my purposes, literary considerations of whether the character 'Socrates' in the *Protagoras* is putting forward the hedonist theory as his own or is merely arguing *ad hominem* as well as historical considerations of whether Socrates himself was a hedonist are irrelevant. All that matters is that the position described in the *Protagoras* is 'available' to the Cyrenaics, which it is. Epicurus is another hedonist who advocates foregoing certain pleasures or undergoing certain pains for the sake of obtaining better long-term consequences.

Annas tries to distinguish the position of the Cyrenaics from Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* by saying the Cyrenaics "seek to maximize episodes of pleasure, and thus abandon the eudaimonistic framework of the *Protagoras*." (Annas (1993) p. 448) I do not see that a commitment to maximizing episodes of pleasure suffices to distinguish the Cyrenaics' position from what Socrates recommends in the *Protagoras*, however. It is true that Socrates recommends planning for one's life as a whole, while the Cyrenaics do not. But Socrates recommends this planning because of its usefulness in attaining more pleasure within one's life, not because a coherent life-plan has any intrinsic value. Thus, it is not the Cyrenaics' supposedly 'maximizing' model of rationality that explains their anti-eudaimonism and lack of future-concern.

3. Irwin: Happiness and Personal Identity

Irwin argues that the Cyrenaics reject eudaimonism because they reject belief in a continuing self. Eudaimonism presupposes a temporally extended self as the subject for "the good life" as a whole.¹¹

Disbelief in a continuing self also justifies their lack of future-concern. If I desire pleasure for myself, I have no reason to sacrifice my pleasures for the sake of that 'other' person down the temporal stream. Shivering, hungry, and ill, that future self might curse me for my wild trips to Las Vegas, but that's no concern of *mine*.

If the Cyrenaics did reject belief in a continuing self, this *would* justify their rejection of eudaimonism and their lack of future-concern. However, Irwin admits that his account "lacks direct evidence."¹² Irwin gives a number of reasons to support his thesis despite this lack of evidence:

¹¹ Irwin sometimes simply talks about the Cyrenaics having doubts that there exists a continuing self; however, at other places (*e.g.*, Irwin (1991) p. 68) he says that the Cyrenaics *reject* the existence of a continuing self.

¹² Irwin (1991) p. 69. Tsouna is blunter: "there is not a trace of direct evidence at all that the Cyrenaics conceived of real objects and persons in compositional terms or that they voiced doubts about temporal identity." (Tsouna (1998) p. 132)

(1) Attributing this thesis to the Cyrenaics makes sense of their ethical positions.¹³

(2) In the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras rejects continued personal identity, so this thesis was in the air. Furthermore, Protagoras and the Cyrenaics have similar epistemologies, so the considerations that drive Protagoras to talk about “Socrates well” and “Socrates ill” as different people would drive the Cyrenaics to similar conclusions.¹⁴

(3) The Cyrenaics doubt that *any* collections are apprehensible, and this general doubt applies to collections like happiness (a collection of pleasures over time) and people (a collection of person-stages over time). Irwin’s evidence comes from Plutarch, who reports that the Cyrenaics would say they were “sweetened” or “whitened,” (so they admit we can apprehend such simple impressions if whiteness or sweetness) but not that they were “walled” or “manned” (so they deny we can apprehend such complex collections of a wall or a man).¹⁵ Irwin says the Cyrenaics believe that to apprehend collections, we must “bundle” ‘simple’ impressions (white, snub-nosed, *etc.*) in the proper way so as to apprehend a collection (*e.g.*, that these form an impression of Socrates), but we cannot.

However, Irwin’s arguments are not strong. Here are three reasons why his interpretation should be rejected:

(a) The evidence that the Cyrenaics have special difficulties with the identity-conditions or apprehensibility of collections is shaky and rests upon a tendentious interpretation of *Against Colotes*. There is little reason to think that their not using barbarous expressions like “I am walled” is based upon a general doctrine of the non-apprehensibility of collections. The Cyrenaics do not *refuse* to classify collections in this

¹³ Irwin (1991) pp. 69-70. Of course, this appeal to the principle of charity by itself is not very strong, if there are other equally plausible ways of making sense of their ethical positions that are better supported textually, as I believe there are.

¹⁴ Irwin (1991) pp. 63-64, 67-68. Again, I do not find this very convincing. See Tsouna (1998) pp. 124-137 for an excellent discussion of the differences between Protagorean relativism (as expounded in the *Theaetetus*, whatever its relationship to the historical Protagoras happens to be) and Cyrenaic subjectivism. Furthermore (as I argue below), if the Cyrenaics were appropriating the Protagorean position, it would be odd that they do not also appropriate the Protagorean vocabulary of *e.g.*, “Socrates well” and “Socrates ill” (*Theaetetus* 158e-160c) to expound their position, since they are happy to use neologisms.

¹⁵ *Adv. Col* 1120de, text [E] in the appendix.

way, as Irwin claims (Irwin (1991) p. 69); they simply do *not* do so. Colotes the Epicurean is trying to satirize the Cyrenaic position and indicate its absurd conclusions with his talk about being “manned” and “walled.” Colotes is pointing out that we can have no knowledge of ordinary objects, according to the Cyrenaic position, and thus that living life would be impossible. That is because, if we can never say that ‘the wall is white,’ but instead should confine ourselves to reporting ‘I am being whitened,’ this would generalize to *every* property that some (putative) object in the environment is supposed to have, and thus we would have no reason to believe that there *is* a wall in the environment. Instead, we should, according to the Cyrenaic position, confine ourselves to what is given to us immediately in our experience and say “I am walled.” Plutarch protests that the Cyrenaics did not *use* phrases like “I am manned” or “I am walled,” but he grants that Colotes’ philosophical point is correct. Irwin reads a large theoretical commitment to the inapprehensibility of collections into this terminological point. The talk of being ‘walled’ and ‘manned’ is entirely Colotes’ satirical invention, however, and there is no reason to think that the Cyrenaics themselves make a principled decision not to use such vocabulary as a result of a complicated theory about the inapprehensibility of collections.¹⁶

(b) The Cyrenaics say that our end is particular pleasure, not happiness. However, they admit that there *is* such a thing as happiness, which is the sum of pleasures over one’s lifetime. If *eudaimonia* presupposes the existence of an extended subject whose life as a whole can be *eudaimôn*, and the Cyrenaics rejected the existence of such a subject, then they should have said that there is no such thing as *eudaimonia*, rather than saying that it is

¹⁶ Tsouna also points out that the Cyrenaics refer to objects like fires and olive shoots in terms that cast no doubt on their temporal identity. Tsouna (1998), chapter 6, and pp. 109-111 argues at length that, although the Cyrenaics voice doubts about our ability to know the *phusis* of anything on the basis of our *pathê*, there is no evidence that metaphysical considerations of a Heraclitean or Protagorean sort fuel these doubts. I find her arguments convincing, but I will not reproduce or support them here.

not our end. Thus, Irwin's thesis does not fit the texts of the Cyrenaics that it purports to explain.¹⁷

(c) Absence of evidence, in this case, is evidence of absence. The doxography on the Cyrenaics is scanty. However, the Cyrenaics are willing to contradict commonplace Greek ideas about ethics and epistemology, and later hostile sources enjoy reporting on shocking Cyrenaic views. Furthermore, the Cyrenaics happily coin neologisms to correct the mistakes implicit in ordinary ways of talking.¹⁸ Thus, if they had rejected continued personal identity, they would have used this rejection to support their anti-eudaimonism and lack of future-concern, and might have coined some novel terminology to indicate the proper way of speaking about 'person-stages.'¹⁹ Later sources likely would have gleefully reported these bizarre views and ways of speaking. But there is *no* direct evidence supporting Irwin's view.²⁰

¹⁷ Tsouna gives a similar argument: the way the Cyrenaics talk about memory seems to presuppose continued personal identity. Aristippus says that memories of pleasures *he has enjoyed* in the past are irrelevant to his *telos*. To talk about remembering *his pleasures* seems to presuppose continued personal identity. Otherwise, he would have talked about the pleasures of "the past-Aristippus," or the like. (Tsouna (1998) p. 133, referring to Athaneus, *Deipn* xii:544a ff., text [C] and Tsouna (2001) section III)

¹⁸ Consider their recommendation that we should say "I am being sweetened" rather than "I am tasting something sweet."

¹⁹ After all, they already had the example of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* to follow in this regard.

²⁰ I have concentrated on how Irwin thinks that disbelief in continued personal identity leads to a rejection of eudaimonism. However, as noted above, he thinks that Cyrenaic skepticism about collections can also justify anti-eudaimonism in another way: since happiness is a collection of particular pleasures over the course of a lifetime, the Cyrenaics would think that it is impossible to apprehend whether we have achieved happiness or not, since we would have to "bundle" our pleasures in a particular way that makes this collection 'happiness.' "Happiness is a collection of pleasures; it is therefore subject to the difficulties that arise for all collections. Though particular pleasures and pains are evident to us, the belief that we are achieving happiness requires us to bundle these pleasures and pains in one particular way..." (Irwin (1991) pp. 65-66). I find this argument dubious. It *might* be plausible to think that the various 'simple' (white, snub-nosed, *etc.*) impressions need to be 'bundled' the proper way before we can say we are having a 'man-like' impression. (Although even this is far from clear. Don't we already have apparent to us in our experience the proper spatial relations among the 'simple' impressions so that we can say that we are having a 'man-like' impression—as opposed to a 'Picasso man-like' impression—even though we cannot say that the cause of this impression is a man?) But how, exactly, do pleasures need to be 'bundled' in a particular way in order to constitute a 'happiness' collection? If the Cyrenaics are simple hedonists, no complex bundling procedure is needed. The Cyrenaics say that happiness is just the sum of pleasures over time (see [A]), and the greater the number of pleasures, the more happiness. Happiness would just be a (temporal) heap of episodes of pleasures, so issues of proper 'bundling' or arrangement would not arise.

4. Tsouna: aiming at both present pleasure and happiness

Unlike Annas and Irwin, Tsouna argues that the Cyrenaics are not that far outside the mainstream of Greek ethics. She says that the Cyrenaics confine the 'perfect good' (*teleion agathon*) to particular pleasure, which is complete and has value only while being experienced.²¹ Despite this, we should *not* aim *only* at present pleasure. We should also aim at happiness, which is having a pleasurable life. Tsouna says that although many sources report that the Cyrenaics claim that only particular pleasure is the *telos*, others claim that the Cyrenaics think of *eudaimonia* as the *telos*. Her evidence for this comes from Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius, who she says attest that Aristippus the Younger "posited the pleasurable life as the moral end [Tsouna's gloss of *telos*]...but that he considered the only perfect or complete good individual bodily pleasure."²² Tsouna tries to reconcile these apparently conflicting reports by claiming that there is a distinction within Cyrenaic ethics between the *telos* and the *teleion agathon*, although the two are closely related. Even though present pleasure is complete while it lasts, it does not last a lifetime, and we need to aim at happiness also so that we can experience particular pleasure again and again, and thus have complete fulfillment of the good many times over our lifetime.²³

I have three objections to Tsouna's position:

(a) The two passages that Tsouna cites²⁴ do not strongly support her claim that Aristippus the Younger considers *eudaimonia* as the *telos*. Both simply say that the Cyrenaics claim that the *telos* is living pleasantly (*to hêdeôs zên*). "Living pleasantly" can mean either that the *telos* is "having one's life as a whole be pleasant" (Tsouna's gloss,

²¹ This is how Tsouna understands passages like [C].

²² Tsouna (2001) section II.

²³ Tsouna (1998) pp. 134-135, and Tsouna (2001) section II. Her terminology changes somewhat between the two presentations of her position. In Tsouna (1998) she says that the Cyrenaics confine the *telos*, or 'moral end,' to particular pleasure, but also place value on happiness, whereas in Tsouna (2001) she says that *happiness* is the *telos*, whereas particular pleasure is the 'complete and final good.' I follow the terminology in Tsouna (2001), but I am not sure whether much hangs on the differences between the two.

²⁴ Clement, *Strom* II 21 127 and Eusebius, *Prep ev.* XIV 18 32. Tsouna also argues that Aristippus of Cyrene, the founder of Cyrenaicism, was a *eudaimonist*. I discuss this claim and its relevance below, in n. 36.

which would be *eudaimonia* on the Cyrenaics' definition of *eudaimonia*) or simply that one's life right now is pleasant. I think it would be better to take the phrase "living pleasantly" simply as a variant for "experiencing pleasure," since that interpretation is more consistent with the other reports we have that the Cyrenaics consider only particular pleasure as the *telos*, rather than attributing to the Cyrenaics an obscure distinction between (as Tsouna puts it) the "moral good" (*telos*) vs. "the perfect or complete or final good" (*teleion agathon*).²⁵

(b) If only present pleasure is the 'perfect good' for the Cyrenaics, it seems that they should say that we also *aim* only at present pleasure. To aim at happiness *also* is to aim at future pleasures, since happiness is the collection of past, present, and future pleasures, and we cannot aim at past pleasures. However, the Cyrenaics discount the value of future pleasures.²⁶ It does not seem plausible to suggest that, by aiming at future pleasures, I will be better able to achieve present pleasures.

(c) Furthermore, the Cyrenaics say that we should *not* aim at future pleasures, but should instead concentrate heedlessly on obtaining pleasures close at hand. Thus, to posit happiness as something we should aim at seems to contradict the testimonia we have regarding the Cyrenaics.

5. The 'Conservative' Interpretation

Despite these objections, I think that something like Tsouna's interpretation can be plausibly advanced.²⁷ Tsouna's discussion is unfortunately clouded by an ambiguity in the

²⁵ Even if the two sources had said that the Cyrenaics thought that a 'pleasant life' (and not just 'living pleasantly') was the *telos*, I do not think that this by itself would warrant Tsouna's attribution of two different types of *telos* (one for *eudaimonia* and one for particular pleasure) to the Cyrenaics. As Irwin notes, the striking anti-eudaimonist reports such as [A] and [F] "attribute quite an unusual view to the Cyrenaics, and for that reason are less likely to be simply the product of misunderstanding or confusion in the sources." (Irwin (1991) p. 55) On the other hand, for one or two sources to say offhandedly that the Cyrenaics think that 'a pleasant life' is the *telos*, when the author's main concern is simply to assert that the Cyrenaics are hedonists (as is the case in these two reports) would at best be weak evidence that the Cyrenaics are seriously committed to the thesis that the *telos* is for one's life *as a whole* to be pleasant.

²⁶ Again, see [B], [C] and [D] in the appendix.

²⁷ I do not know whether Tsouna would approve of the following emendations and extensions of her position. The 'conservative' interpretation is inspired by her discussion, but it is my own. I call it the 'conservative' interpretation because, according to it, the Cyrenaics are not as far outside the mainstream of

term “present pleasure.” When the Cyrenaics glorify present pleasures and denigrate past and future pleasures, do they mean that past and future pleasures have no value whatsoever, or merely that they have no value *qua past and future pleasures*, but only when they are present? Her discussion is not entirely clear, but some of what she says suggests the latter. Tsouna claims that the Cyrenaics “confine the moral end to pleasure while we are experiencing it.”²⁸ That is, pleasure has value only *while being experienced*.²⁹ The anticipation of future pleasures and memories of past pleasures have no value.³⁰ However, future pleasures *will* have value—when they are being experienced, when they *are* present. Since they have value *when present*, they are worth pursuing. Thus, Tsouna should not say that happiness is the ‘*other thing*’ that we should seek, *in addition to* present pleasure. Instead, we are seeking to maximize the episodes of pleasure we have present to us, and happiness is the collection of these pleasurable experiences.

But if this is correct, then why do the Cyrenaics say that particular pleasure, and *not* happiness, is the end, and that happiness is choiceworthy because of particular pleasure? Happiness cannot be an *instrumental* good, because particular pleasure is not some further result *caused* by gaining happiness. Instead, on the interpretation being sketched here, they are saying that happiness derives all of its value from the value of the particular pleasures that compose it. Happiness has no value above and beyond the value of the bits and pieces of pleasure that make it up. Also, there is no “structure” to happiness. The Cyrenaics are targeting Aristotle’s claim that happiness involves having the activities of one’s life forming a coherent, organized whole, the value of which cannot be reduced to the value of the activities and experiences within that life. We value happiness *only* because we value the particular pleasures that constitute happiness, while we do *not* value these particular

Greek ethical thought as they are according to the second interpretation (the ‘radical’ interpretation) I propose.

²⁸ Tsouna (1998) p. 134.

²⁹ They would probably say that, strictly speaking, pleasure only *exists* while being experienced (see [C]).

pleasures because of the way in which they fit together in order to make our lives as a whole happy.³¹

5a. The self-stultifying nature of future-concern

But if the Cyrenaics value future pleasures, why do they profess a lack of future-concern? The simplest answer, which is also supported somewhat by the doxography, is that planning for the future, and trying to obtain happiness by foregoing present pleasures, is self-defeating. One does not gain happiness by anxiously planning one's future out and toiling for it, but by enjoying whatever pleasures are at hand, without worrying about long-term consequences.³²

The Cyrenaics think that “to accumulate the pleasures which produce happiness is most disagreeable,” because one will be choosing present pain for the sake of future pleasures.³³ The Cyrenaics instead aim at enjoying present pleasures, without letting themselves be troubled at what is not present, *i.e.*, the past and future.³⁴ Aristippus also

³⁰ If I feel good contemplating some prospective pleasure, then it is my present pleasures caused by that contemplation that has value, not the future pleasure itself. But the Cyrenaics deny that this contemplation is normally pleasurable (see [D]).

³¹ See [F]. This is how the ‘conservative’ interpretation would understand this passage, although I think the interpretation it receives under the ‘radical’ interpretation is more compelling (see below). At this point, Tsouna would probably disagree with the ‘conservative’ interpretation, since she claims that “the moral importance of happiness is not entirely reducible to the value of the moral end [i.e., particular pleasures]. It rather has to do with the fact that happiness contains the moral end *many times over*.” (Tsouna (2001) section II) However, I am not entirely certain in what sense she thinks that the value of *eudaimonia*—an aggregate of particular pleasures—is not reducible to the value of the particular pleasures that constitute it.

³² See [B].

³³ If the ‘conservative’ interpretation is correct, then there may be good reason to retain the *mê* in one manuscript of DL ii 89-90 ([D] in the appendix), which Irwin (accepting that manuscript) translates as follows: “And so it appears to them that the accumulation (*hathroismos*) of pleasures that does **not** produce happiness is most disagreeable.” Because trying to obtain future pleasures through careful planning requires you to undergo many painful experiences, this accumulation of pleasures does *not*, as a matter of fact, produce happiness, even though happiness is a collection of pleasures. (See Irwin (1991) p. 80 n. 8.) Such an interpretation would require reading passage [D] as saying, not that actually accumulating those pleasures does not result in happiness—since this would contradict their definition of happiness in [A]—but that the process of *trying* to accumulate such pleasures does not successfully result in accumulating a greater balance of pleasures over pains than one would have otherwise attained. Thus, the (unsuccessful) ‘accumulation’ of pleasures does not result in happiness.

³⁴ The disagreement between Epicurus and the Cyrenaics about the pleasantness of expectations of future pleasure (and pain of expectation of pain) goes a long way toward explaining their differing attitudes toward planning for the future. Epicurus thinks that the memory of past pleasures, and the expectation of future pleasures, are themselves most pleasant, and hence he emphasizes the importance of careful planning in arranging what one will experience in the future. The Cyrenaics, however, deny this, saying that pleasures are pleasant only when actually being experienced. So Epicurus recommends that one can banish fear of the

says that the future is nothing to him because it's "unclear." Exactly what he means by this is itself unclear, but he may be asserting that planning for the future is not worth the trouble because of the uncertainties of the effects of one's actions.³⁵

6. The 'Radical' Interpretation

The 'conservative' interpretation gives a plausible way of understanding the relationship between pleasure and happiness, and a justification for the lack of future-concern that has some textual support. Nonetheless, the claim that one is better off not worrying about the future might seem quite dubious. However, let us imagine that Aristippus were to *admit* that his profligate ways would lead to future pain and misery, but insist on jetting to Las Vegas anyway, because right now he doesn't *care* about future pleasures, but cares about getting *this* pleasure *now*.³⁶ If Aristippus said this, we might

future by carefully providing for one's future and shaping one's desires. The Cyrenaics recommend simply not thinking about the future at all, and enjoying whatever pleasures are close at hand.

³⁵ See [C]. As the saying goes, "Life is uncertain: eat dessert first." This justification for focusing on the present is quite common, although in most cases it's not convincing, since the *probabilities* of the effects of different courses of action can often be known, and the probabilities justify foregoing present pleasure for the sake of the future. The Cyrenaics may have a better case than it first appears, however, given their skepticism about our ability to know the natures of things in the external world.

³⁶ After all, this *is* reported to be Aristippus' attitude toward the future—not only did he not bother planning and worrying about the future, but that he genuinely didn't care about it. See [C]. The denial in [D] that the anticipation of future pleasures is itself pleasant can also support imputing to the Cyrenaics the view that people do not care much about the future. (After all, if they did, wouldn't the anticipation of future pleasures itself be pleasurable?) Although I use texts like [B] and [C] that describe Aristippus' attitude toward the future, and I have talked about 'Aristippus' replies to critics, my argument does not rely on considerations of what exactly the historical Aristippus believed. I am interested in the position of the Cyrenaic school, whose epistemology and ethics were systematized by Aristippus the younger, grandson of Aristippus of Cyrene. (See Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* XIV, 18.31-32, and Tsouna-McKirahan (1994) pp. 377-82. See also Irwin (1991) p. 79 n. 2 for further references on this issue and an argument for more continuity than is sometimes supposed between the views of Aristippus of Cyrene and later Cyrenaics.) In correspondence, Richard Bett has pointed out that some of the stories told about Aristippus by his contemporaries might not fit exactly with the attitude about the future described here. For instance, Aristippus agrees with Socrates that it is better not to indulge in adulterous sex when there are risks involved (*Mem.* II 1 5), which suggests some concern with future consequences and not the present alone, as does his assertion that liberty, rather than rule or slavery, is the route to happiness (*Mem.* II 1 11). (Tsouna (2001), section II, relying on such texts and Aristippus' assertion in *Mem* II 1 11 that he seeks happiness, argues that Aristippus of Cyrene was in fact a eudaimonist. See also Tsouna-McKirahan (1994) pp. 377-82, again.) The attitudes and actions of the elder Aristippus probably were not entirely consistent in all respects with the developed ethics of the Cyrenaic school, because (I will argue below) some of the distinctive tenets of Cyrenaic ethics might well have been based upon the Cyrenaic epistemology, which the elder Aristippus had not promulgated. However, by the time we get to late sources like Diogenes Laertius and Athenaeus, 'Aristippus' is mainly just a stand-in for the Cyrenaic school, or a figure of abuse because of his hedonism. The later record about Aristippus is especially muddled because of the prominent role of Aristippus' grandson Aristippus in systematizing the school's positions. (Note: I do not regard the

decide he is an irrational, short-sighted person. However, there is an interesting philosophical justification for this response, and the texts support attributing it to the Cyrenaics.

The Cyrenaics assert that we desire some *particular* pleasure, *e.g.*, the pleasure that results from having this drink *now*.³⁷ Thus, our *telos*—which is based upon what we desire—is this *particular* pleasure, not (generic) ‘pleasure’ or the maximization of pleasure over our lifetime. The Annicereans, a sect of later Cyrenaics, make precisely this point:

The Annicereans ...set down no definite end of the whole of life, but claimed that there is a special end for each action—the pleasure resulting from the action.³⁸

These Cyrenaics start from Aristotle’s observation that the *telos* of something is what it aims at. However they *deny* that there is a *telos* to our lives as a whole; instead, each of our actions aims at some particular pleasure. And since our actions are based upon our desires, the Cyrenaics would say that, just as our actions each aim at some particular pleasure, so too do our desires aim at particular pleasures. Furthermore, what we desire changes over time—first this pleasure, then that one. Therefore, what is good for us also

attribution of a concern for internal freedom and self-control—attested to by later sources—as itself evidence that Aristippus or later Cyrenaics did not diverge significantly from the mainstream Greek ethical tradition, as Tsouna (2001) section II argues. This concern need not be motivated by eudaimonistic considerations, since an entirely instrumentalist justification for such a concern can be given, one that is based upon the painful results of losing such psychological independence.)

³⁷ See [A] and [F].

³⁸ Clement, *Strom.* ii 2 130.7-8 ([F] in the appendix). Although the Annicereans are a later sect of Cyrenaics who deviated from Cyrenaic orthodoxy in some ways, I see no reason in particular to think of this position of theirs as an innovation. As I will argue later, it fits in well with the Cyrenaics’ epistemology, and it contradicts nothing we know of the mainline Cyrenaic position. Compare it with the immediately following claim: the Annicereans deride *ataraxia* as the condition of a corpse. This is an Annicerean statement, but one that would be warmly endorsed by any orthodox Cyrenaic. See DL ii 96-97 and Annas (1993) pp. 233-235 for a description of the Annicereans. Much of what the Annicereans say does not seem consistent with rejecting future-concern and valuing only the pleasures that one presently desires, for instance, (1) “If the wise man receives annoyance, he will none the less be happy even if few pleasures accrue to him,” (DL ii 96) (2) “Though we make pleasure the end and are annoyed when deprived of it, we shall nevertheless cheerfully endure this because of our love of our friend” (DL ii 97, trans. Hicks (1925)), and (3) the good person will act out patriotic motives (DL ii 96). However, I see no reason not to take [F] at face value despite this; what the Annicereans say seems to contradict not only [F] but also hedonism generally, and they explicitly affirm hedonism. In any case, although [F] puts the position especially clearly, we can gather the main point of [F] from other texts that report on the mainstream Cyrenaic position. The effect of the rejection of happiness in favor of particular pleasures in [A], when combined with the assertion in [B] and [C] (and at least implied in [D]) that the good resides in the

changes over time, since the Cyrenaics think that our *telos* is based upon what we approve of.³⁹ And there is no further overall end to unify these particular ends.

This position radically subjectivizes the good to what I desire at present. A useful modern analog is the description of value and rationality offered by David Gauthier. He says that value is a measure of preference, and desires are “the springs of good and evil.”⁴⁰ To choose rationally is to endeavor to maximize the fulfillment of one’s *present* preferences.⁴¹ However, this does not necessarily lead to the Cyrenaics’ lack of future-concern: if you happen to care about your future well-being, then it makes sense to delay present gratification for the sake of future well-being. But if you don’t care about the future, pursuing present gratification at the cost of future pain is not irrational.⁴² The Cyrenaics *do* claim that we care far less about future pleasures and pains than about ones close at hand,⁴³ and this claim is credible: my father worries less about the cancer he might get ten years hence because of his smoking than about the pain he currently experiences because of the corns on his feet. And this claim, when combined with the subjectivist thesis that what is valuable for you at some time is a function of your desires at that time, supports their lack of future-concern.

Note that the position I am sketching above, although it makes large use of the notion of a person’s desires changing over time, and hence what is good for a person changing over time, makes no use of the notion of a person-at-a-time. That is, no substantial theory of personal identity is needed. What is good for a person is relativized to what that person desires at that moment. Hence, we can say that “At time *t*, O is good for

present alone, is that the notion of a goal over time is rejected, and a succession of short-term goals replaces it, which is what the first sentence of [F] insists on. (I thank Richard Bett for pointing this out.)

³⁹ Reported in Sextus Empiricus, *AM* vii 199-200, text [G] in the appendix.

⁴⁰ Gauthier (1986) p. 21.

⁴¹ Gauthier (1986) p. 32. He puts it in terms of the preferences one holds ‘in the choice situation.’ This also gives another way of understanding Aristippus’ assertion in [C] that the future is “nothing to him” and that he discerns “the good by the single present time alone”: all that matters in deciding what to do is what he actually wants *now*; what he *will* want in the future is irrelevant to his *present* choice.

P” but need not say that “O is good for *P-at-time-t*.” Since the Cyrenaics abjured physical and metaphysical speculation (DL ii 92), whether a person at some time is “really” the same person as somebody at another time would not interest them, so it would be preferable not to ascribe a substantial theory of personal identity to them. However, that one’s desires change over time is manifest, and that is basis enough for their position, without needing to resort to any substantial theories of personal identity. I take this to be an advantage of the radical interpretation over Irwin’s.

Let me flesh out this subjectivist position by considering how the Cyrenaics would respond to two possible objections against it: the first by Aristotle, the second by the Socrates of the *Protagoras*.⁴⁴

Aristotle would say that it is wrong to choose according to your present preferences when these preferences lead to misery. For instance, being healthy is in your *interest*, whatever your preferences happen to be. Thus, to choose to party in Las Vegas at the expense of your health would be mistaken, even if you don’t care about your future health.

The Cyrenaics would respond that it is impossible to separate what is in one’s *interest* from what one *prefers*. Aristotle’s appeal to what is objectively in our interest is based upon his belief that human nature has its own *telos*, so that good and evil are defined teleologically but not thereby subjectively. The Cyrenaics deny that we can have knowledge of the *phusis* of things, which would include human nature. They are “shut up inside their *pathê* as in a state of siege”⁴⁵ and any knowledge we can attain must be based upon these fleeting, subjective experiences, which don’t reveal how things are in the world. The Cyrenaics’ extreme subjectivism in epistemology should extend to their ethics, and their ethical position, on the ‘radical’ interpretation, is the one that naturally follows

⁴² As Gauthier puts it, “reflective heedlessness is not irrational.” (Gauthier (1986) p. 37) He adds: “One may take an interest in one’s future well-being now, preferring a satisfying life to more immediate gratification. But also, one may not.”

⁴³ See n. 36.

⁴⁴ These objections are basically the same as two of the objections considered in Gauthier (1986): from the partisans of *interest* (pp. 33-36) and *prudence* (pp. 36-38).

from their epistemology. Sextus points out the close relationship between the Cyrenaics' epistemology and ethics,⁴⁶ and we can elaborate slightly on the parallel he suggests: just as we have no access to the *phusis* of things, and thus cannot say that *e.g.*, 'the wall is yellow,' but can say that 'I am yellowed,' since how things appear to me is obvious, so to in ethics, we have no access to human nature to appeal to in deciding our *telos*, but can know what we now approve of—that is, what our present preferences are—and these are the basis of good and evil.⁴⁷ According to the radical interpretation, there is an epistemological basis for the Cyrenaics' rejection of eudaimonism—their restriction of knowledge entirely to one's present subjective experiences.

The Socrates of the *Protagoras* would object on other grounds. He says that temporally closer pleasures appear bigger than distant ones, but often really aren't, and therefore we must correct for this distortion⁴⁸ by using a measuring art.⁴⁹ We can unpack this metaphor as follows: you might presently *care* less about lung cancer ten years hence than about your corns, but acting on this preference would be mistaken, because the cancer will be horribly painful when it arrives, and at that point you'll dislike the pain of cancer much more than you presently dislike the pain of corns.

This objection makes no reference to human nature. It can be framed entirely in terms of the agent's future preferences, and thus would have more bite against the Cyrenaics. However, they could respond that if what is valuable is a function of one's desires, desires (as such) cannot be criticized as irrational, unless they are based upon irrational beliefs. Thus, if I desire X (some particular pleasure) more than I desire Y (a

⁴⁵ *Against Colotes* 1120d (trans. in Tsouana (1998), p. 144).

⁴⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *AM* 199-200 ([G] in the appendix). See also Philodemus, *On Choices and Avoidances*, Pherc. 1251, Col. II and III, which seems to be targeting the Cyrenaics. (The Philodemus passage—if it is Philodemus—is discussed in Indelli and Tsouana-McKirahan (1995) pp. 19-23, 85-7, 103, and 118-126.) Although the Herculaneum papyrus seems to fit in well with the epistemological basis for the 'radical' interpretation that I suggest, the text is much too sketchy and vague to support much weight, so I do not include a discussion of it here.

⁴⁷ This position is akin to Hobbes': good is the object of appetite or desire, evil the object of hate. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 6.

⁴⁸ *Protagoras* 356b-c.

larger, future pleasure) while acknowledging that X is smaller than Y, then we cannot say that this desire is irrational, since what is good for me is based upon what I desire at that moment, not the other way around.

The fundamental issue separating Socrates from the Cyrenaics, on the 'radical' interpretation, is whether we should regard our preferences in a temporally neutral manner. Socrates insists that we should, while the Cyrenaics agree with Gauthier that "practical reason takes its standpoint in the present."⁵⁰ If the Cyrenaics were to agree with Socrates that we should regard our preferences in a temporally neutral manner, then we would be back with the 'conservative' interpretation of the Cyrenaics. On that interpretation, the Cyrenaics treat one's preferences in a temporally neutral way, whereas on the radical interpretation, they do not.

Although the reason for a lack of future-concern is quite different on the two interpretations, the relationship between pleasure and happiness according to the 'radical' interpretation would be similar to their relationship in the 'conservative' interpretation. Happiness is valuable because, as a collection of particular pleasures, the pleasures that constitute that collection are each valuable to me. However, these particular pleasures are not valuable for me *simpliciter*, but are valuable for me at the times that I desire and experience them. Likewise, happiness as such cannot be valuable for me, because there is no such thing as the good of one's life, considered as a whole.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Protagoras* 356d-357b.

⁵⁰ Gauthier (1986) p. 38.

⁵¹ The Cyrenaics do say that prudence is valuable. (DL ii 91) What can they mean by this, given their lack of future-concern, since they have no truck in foregoing present pleasures for the sake of the future? The most plausible answer is that, even if one only worries about satisfying one's present preferences, one can still do so in a rational or irrational way, and certain courses of action, fears, (*e.g.*, the superstitious fear of the gods: DL ii 91), and the like, can be criticized as resting upon mistaken beliefs. If I don't "look before I leap," and as a result break my leg, my leaping would be imprudent, based upon my present preference not to suffer pain in the immediate future. Thus, even within the 'radical' interpretation, which seems to take one's present preferences as a brute given and the source of all value, there is still some room for the evaluation, criticism, and reform of one's preferences and one's character. Such evaluation would have to be entirely internal, however, referring to one's overall set of preferences and how best to satisfy them, given one's beliefs. On this sort of basis, the 'radical' interpretation may be able to incorporate some aspects of the 'conservative' interpretation: *e.g.*, that preferences for far distant pleasures might be foolish, because they are so difficult to satisfy, given our lack of knowledge about the world (see n. 35).

7. Comparative evaluation of the two interpretations.

Unfortunately, I do not think that the scanty doxography allows us to ascertain with any great confidence which interpretation is correct. However, I think that there are some reasons to favor the 'radical' over the 'conservative' interpretation.⁵²

Many of the texts I have been discussing seem to support the 'radical' interpretation. For instance, in text [F], the Cyrenaics say that there is no definite end to the whole of life. This quote constitutes the most serious objection to the 'conservative' interpretation, since on that interpretation, it would be sensible to say that we *do* have a goal for our life as a whole: to have a maximally pleasant life. In contrast, the 'radical' interpretation can easily accommodate this assertion.⁵³ The 'radical' interpretation can also easily explain the insistence in [F] that there is a special end for each action—the pleasure produced by that action, and the Cyrenaics' doctrine, reported in [A], that the end is *particular* pleasure. If the conservative interpretation were correct, we would expect them simply to say that each action aims at 'pleasure' (generically), and that the end is pleasure, or perhaps the maximization of pleasure.

Other texts are also easier to make sense of on the 'radical' interpretation. That one's *telos* is based upon one's present preferences seems to be supported by the assertion in [C] that Aristippus "discerned the good by the single present time alone," and his assertion that the past and future are nothing to him. [G] provides additional support for the 'radical' interpretation: Sextus says that, according to the Cyrenaics, the goodness of pleasure is established by our approving of it in our experience, thus confirming the dependence of the *telos* on what we prefer.

⁵² I'd like to thank Richard Bett, whose comments on an earlier version of this paper included some arguments favoring the 'radical' over the 'conservative' interpretation. I'm happy to incorporate some of his suggestions in what appears below.

⁵³ But this objection might not be decisive. One could reply that, on the conservative interpretation, maximal pleasure is not a goal I have for my life as a whole, but simply what will result if I get what I want for each moment: to experience pleasure at that moment.

Finally, the key claim for the radical interpretation—that what is valuable for you at some time is a function of your desires at that time—both fits in well with the Cyrenaics' epistemology and has a fair amount of textual support. In contrast, the key claim for the conservative interpretation—that it is self-defeating to try to obtain happiness by foregoing present pleasures—is both implausible in itself and has only limited textual support. (That support is the assertion in [C] that the future is 'unclear,' and the final sentence of [D], which says that accumulating the pleasures that produce happiness is most disagreeable.)

8. Conclusion

Trying to reconstruct the Cyrenaics' position necessarily involves some speculation. But I hope I have shown that we have good reason to think that the Cyrenaics' anti-eudaimonism and lack of future-concern have interesting philosophical justifications. On either interpretation, the value of happiness is entirely derivative from the value of the episodes of pleasure that constitute it. On the 'conservative' interpretation, the Cyrenaics' lack of future-concern results from their belief that the best way to maximize the pleasure in one's life is to enjoy whatever pleasures are ready at hand, with no thought of tomorrow. On the radical interpretation, the lack of future-concern is the result of their relativizing what is valuable for me to my present desires, which is based upon their subjectivism in epistemology.

Appendix: passages discussed⁵⁴

[A] The end is not the same as happiness. For the end is particular (*kata meron*) pleasure, whereas happiness is a collection (*sustêma*) made out of particular pleasures. among which are counted together (*sunarithmountai*) both past and future pleasures.

Particular pleasure is choiceworthy because of itself. Happiness, on the other hand, is choiceworthy not because of itself, but because of the particular pleasures. (DL ii 87-88.)

[B] [Aristippus] derived pleasure from what was present, and did not toil to procure the enjoyment of something not present. (DL ii 66) (trans. Hicks (1925))

[C] Aristippus welcomed the experience of pleasure (*hêdupatheia*), and said it is the end, and that happiness is founded on it. And he said that it was for a single time only (*monochronos*). Like prodigal people, he thought that neither the memory of past gratifications nor the expectation of future ones was anything to him, but he discerned the good by the single present time alone. He regarded having been gratified and being about to be gratified as nothing to him, on the grounds that the one no longer is and the other is not yet and is unclear—just like what happens to self-indulgent people, who suppose that only what is present benefits them. (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* xii 544a ff.)

[D] Further, they do not think pleasure is achieved by memory or expectation of goods, as Epicurus believed. For they think the movement of the soul is worn out by time. ...they think that though pleasure is choiceworthy in itself, the disturbing things that produce certain pleasures are often of the contrary sort. And so it appears to them that the accumulation (*hathroismos*) of pleasures that produce happiness is most disagreeable. (DL ii 89-90)⁵⁵

[E] 'The Cyrenaics,' according to Colotes, 'do not say that there is a man or a horse or a wall, but that they themselves are walled or horsed or manned.' First of all, like those who bring vexatious accusations, he uses terms maliciously. For admittedly these consequences follow for the Cyrenaics; but he ought to have presented what happens as they themselves

⁵⁴ Unless otherwise noted, translations are from Irwin (1991).

⁵⁵ I have followed most editors in omitting a *mê* in the final sentence which appears in one manuscript. Irwin retains the *mê*, however, and so he translates the sentence as follows: "And so it appears to them that the accumulation (*hathroismos*) of pleasures that does **not** produce happiness is most disagreeable."

expound it. For they say they are sweetened, turned bitter, chilled, heated, lightened, or darkened, and that each of these affections has its own proper and unchallenged obviousness within itself. (*Adv. Col.* 1120de)

[F] The Annicereans <i.e., followers of Anniceras> in the Cyrenaic succession set down no definite end of the whole of life, but claimed that there is a special end for each action—the pleasure resulting from the action. These Cyrenaics repudiate Epicurus' account of pleasure, as the removal of pain, denouncing it as the condition of a corpse. (Clement, *Strom.* ii 2 130.7-8)

[G] ...It seems that what these people [the Cyrenaics] say about ends corresponds to what they say about criteria. For the affections also extend as far as the ends. For some affections are pleasant, some painful, others intermediate...

Of all things, then, the affections are criteria and ends, and they say, we live by following these, relying on obviousness and approval—on obviousness in relation to the other affections, and on approval in relation to pleasure. (Sextus Empiricus, *AM* vii 199-200)

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