

The Pleasure of Presence: Aristippus' Ironic Hedonism

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Abstract: *Aristippus of Cyrene (435-350) was a hedonist, but of a most peculiar stripe. While he identified pleasure as the highest good, he restricted its temporal range to the present. As Diogenes Laertius puts it, he "enjoyed the pleasure of what was present (ἀπέλαυε μὲν γὰρ ἡδονῆς τῶν παρόντων), and did not toil to procure the enjoyment of things not present" (II.66). The goal of this paper is to make sense of this claim.*

Key Words: Aristippus, Pleasure, Hedonism, Present, Socratic.

Aristippus of Cyrene (435-350) was a hedonist, but of a most peculiar stripe. While he identified pleasure as the highest good, he restricted its temporal range to the present. As Diogenes Laertius puts it, he “enjoyed the pleasure of what was *present* (ἀπέλαυε μὲν γὰρ ἡδονῆς τῶν παρόντων), and did not toil to procure the enjoyment of things not present” (II.66).¹ Unlike more familiar versions of hedonism, such as those put forward by Epicurus or Socrates in the *Protagoras*, he made no room for the calculation of future pleasures and the minimization of future pains.² Instead, he thought “it enough if we enjoy each single pleasure when it happens to come our way” (II.92).³ Athenaeus elaborates.

[Aristippus] added that pleasure occupies one temporal unit [*monochronon*], since he believed, as profligates do, that neither the memory of past enjoyments nor the expectation of future ones be important for him. Judging the good in light of the present alone, he considered that what he enjoyed in the past and will enjoy in the future be not important for him, the former because it exists no more, the latter because it does not yet exist and is not manifest.⁴

The goal of this paper is to make sense of Aristippus’ view. This is no easy task for at least three reasons. The first is the most obvious: the paucity of the texts that have been attributed to him. Second and more interesting is the fact that the desire to minimize future pains and maximize pleasures, and then the calculation of how to do so, seems to

1 The text, both Greek and English, is Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, translated by R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). I have also consulted *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, translated by P. Mensch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Unless otherwise noted, citations are from the former, albeit with the occasional modification, and will be indicated by book and chapter number in parentheses.

2 Socrates in the *Protagoras* argued that “the art of measurement” (ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη: 356d5) is needed to maximize future pleasures and avoid future pains, and thereby offer a chance at “salvation” (σωτηρία). Epicurus assigned this task to “wisdom” (φρόνησις), which he called

“the greatest good” (DL X.132).

3 At II.85, Diogenes shifts to a discussion of “the philosophers of the Cyrenaic school which sprang from [Aristippus].” This paper makes no attempt to distinguish which doctrines belonged to Aristippus himself and which only to his followers.

4 Athenaeus. *Deipnosophists* XII 544a=SSR IV A 174. This text is included in the Appendix of Ugo Zilioli’s, *The Cyrenaics* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), p. 187-188, which is titled “Cyrenaic Testimonies in Translation.”

come quite naturally to human beings. Anyone with even a modicum of reflective self-control would likely agree with O'Keefe when he says that Aristippus' rejection of "planning for the future, and foregoing present pleasures or undergoing present pain for the sake of future pleasures...seems like a good strategy for leading an unpleasant life."⁵ Third, on a philosophical level hedonism is typically merged with *eudaimonism*. On this view, happiness, understood as a condition of an entire life rather than a momentary experience, is the highest good. For the hedonistic *eudaimonist*, then, the best life is one of prolonged and sustainable, rather than momentary, pleasure. By contrast, Aristippus maintained that "our end (τέλος) is particular pleasure" rather than happiness "in which are included both past and future pleasures" (II.87). He claimed "that to accumulate the pleasures which are productive of happiness appears...a most irksome (δυσκολώτατον) business" (II.90). As such, he eschewed the question that Annas identifies as the core of Ancient Greek Ethics: "am I satisfied with my life as a whole, and with the way it has developed and promises to continue?"⁶

Irwin argues that Aristippus rejected *eudaimonism* because he rejected the basic assumption lying behind it: namely, that human beings are "the sort of temporally extended agents for whom *eudaemonism* would be the right conception of the good."⁷ He claims that Aristippus was a sceptic "about personal identity" who dismissed the notion that a human life constitutes an organized whole.

While Irwin acknowledges that there is no "direct evidence" to support this claim, he argues that it follows from a principle Aristippus did make explicit: only "mental affections (τὰ πάθη) can be known" (καταληπτά), and not "the objects from which they come" (II.92). On this view, which restricts us to what the Pyrrhonian sceptic would call "the appearances," you may know that right now the substance in your mouth tastes sweet to you, but because "any belief going beyond our affections is open to sceptical doubt" there is no good reason to believe

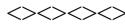
5 O'Keefe, Tim. "The Cyrenaics on Pleasure, Happiness, and Future-Concern." *Phronesis* 47(2002), p. 396.

6 Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 28.

7 Irwin, Terence. "Aristippus Against Happiness." *The Monist* 74(1991), p. 69.

that the substance itself is sweet.⁸ Correspondingly, Irwin argues, there is no good reason to believe “in a persistent self,” which in turn becomes the basis for Aristippus’ break with the standard Greek view that “happiness is the final good” (Irwin 1991, 75).⁹

There are a host of issues here—primarily epistemological—that have been debated by scholars, but I will not pursue them. Instead, I will concentrate on a single question, one that takes its bearings exclusively from the stories Diogenes Laertius tells about Aristippus. What sort of life emerges from his valorization of the pleasure of present moments? More broadly, what does it mean to live in the present, as Aristippus apparently claimed to do?



His most remarkable feature was his openness to all forms of experience. He had the “ability to feel confident in all society (*πᾶσι θαρρύντως ὁμιλεῖν*)” (II.68). He “was capable of adapting himself (*ἀρμόσασθαι*) to place, time and person” and “could always turn the situation to good account (*ἀεὶ τὸ προσπεσὸν εὖ διατιθέμενος*)” (II.66). In other words, he could derive pleasure from whatever presented itself to him, whether it happened to be feasting on a well roasted partridge (II.66) or a tyrant’s spittle dripping down his face (II.67). Despite the fact that he consorted with the rich (II.70) and gleefully said to Plato that “there is nothing to hinder a man from living extravagantly (*πολυτελεῶς*) and well (*καλῶς*)” (II.69), he was equally as comfortable wearing rags (II.6). He indulged in activities that others would find shameful. At the court of Dionysius he once dressed as a woman

8 A significant number of the *testimonia* address this principle. Consider Plutarch’s *Against Colotes*, (1120c–d=SSR IV A 211): “the Cyrenaics...placing all affections and sense-impressions within themselves, thought that the evidence derived from them was not enough, as far as assertions on external objects are concerned. Distancing themselves from external objects, they shut themselves up within their affections as in a siege. In doing so, they adopted the locution ‘it appears’ but refused to say in addition that ‘it is’ with regard to external objects” (Zililoi, 2014, p. 190). A thorough treatment of the relation between Aristippus and the sceptics on this issue can be found in Voula Tsouna’s *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9 O’Keefe (2002), p. 400-401 criticizes Irwin on this.

(II.78) and on another occasion “threw himself down at [Dionysius’] feet” (II. 79) to beg a favor for a friend. Apparently, there was, nothing that Aristippus would not do, and nothing that he did not enjoy.

What emerges from these stories is a picture of Aristippus as “indifferent” (ἀδιάφορον: II.94) to the particular content of any given pleasure. He embraced with equal alacrity both “poverty and riches...slavery and freedom, nobility and low birth, honour and dishonour” (II.94). In a similar vein, it did not matter to him in what city he happened to be dwelling since “he said the world (κόσμον) itself was his fatherland” (πατρίδα) (II.99). At his most extreme, he even claimed that “both life and death are choiceworthy” (αἰρετόν) (II.94).

Aristippus’ indifference—or his openness—led to what I will call his ‘ironic hedonism.’ On the one hand, he identified pleasure as the good, and seemed to pursue it.

On the other, he denied that he was a “lover of pleasure” (φιλήδονος: II.75), for he could equally well take or leave any particular pleasure. So, yes, he was a hedonist, but one for whom no particular pleasure had any special value. Nonetheless, it was the particular pleasure that he identified as the *telos*.

Consider the following stories Diogenes Laertius tells.

Dionysius once offered him a choice between three courtesans. Aristippus “carried off all three, saying, ‘Paris paid dearly for giving the preference to one of three.’”¹⁰ But when Aristippus brought the women home, he did not begin the party. Instead, he “let them go.” With this gesture he showed his ability to “choose (ἐλέσθαι) and disdain (καταφρονῆσαι)” (II.67) at the same time.

He once told what only sounded like a salacious joke. As he entered the house of a courtesan, the young man accompanying him blushed. Aristippus responded by saying, “it is not going in that is dangerous, but being unable to go out” (II.69). In other words, the challenge that pleasure presents is to enjoy it while not looking beyond it and trying to

10 As the story goes, the Trojan prince Paris was asked to choose which of the three goddesses—Hera, Athena or Aphrodite—was the most beautiful. He chose Aphrodite because she promised him Helen as a wife. And thus began the Trojan War.

get more. This is what he meant by his “mastery” (τὸ κρατεῖν) over pleasure. Rather than the familiar notion of “abstaining (τὸ μὴ χρῆσθαι) from pleasures”—of resisting temptation or fighting desire—he advocated only not “being worsted” (μὴ ἡττᾶσθαι) by them (II.73). So, for example, as Aristippus said about his relationship with a famous beauty, “I have Laïs but she not me” (II.75). He enjoyed her company but she maintained no hold on when she was not present. He felt no worse when she was gone.

Aristippus compared himself to physicians. They are “in attendance on those who are sick” (II.70) without themselves being sick, while he enjoys beautiful women without identifying himself with, or becoming attached to (infected by), the pleasure they bring. Similar was his attitude towards money. Unlike his putative mentor Socrates, he charged tuition but did so not for his own benefit, but for that of his students. His goal was to teach them “how best to spend their money” (II.72).

To sum up so far: Aristippus did not discriminate between, rank-order or become attached to particular pleasures. Instead, he was capable of extracting pleasure from any situation. Again, he was open to—or indifferent towards—whatever presented itself.

This is puzzling. How could he have been so thoroughly indiscriminate when it came to the experience of particular pleasures if he counted them as the highest good? How could every moment be potentially pleasurable for him, regardless of how degrading it was? There seems to be only one answer. What Aristippus found pleasurable in every present moment was what they all had in common; namely, the simple fact of their presence. To explain, I must speculate, since Aristippus himself said nothing on this issue.

A pleasurable activity is engaging. It absorbs our attention for it aims at no goal other than itself. It is thus complete at every moment. To put the point in simple phenomenological terms, when we are thoroughly enjoying ourselves we do not look to the future, for we are immersed in what we are doing (now) and do not want it to end. We thus feel no inclination to look at the clock. As such, we are, relatively speaking, unaware of the passage of time. By contrast, when we are engaged in ordinary activity we are acutely aware of the passage of time for naturally most activities are oriented to the attainment of future goals. In this sense we do want them to end.

Consider the building of a house. Each of its related tasks—laying the foundation, constructing the walls, and so on—is incomplete in itself, for it leads to and requires the next. Each is meaningful only insofar as it contributes to the final goal, which is the finished product. Only when the house as a whole is fully constructed, and the entire time-consuming process has come to an end, is the activity complete and does it come to a halt. By contrast, a pleasurable activity does not need to come to a temporal end in order to attain its end. It is complete at every moment.¹¹

Consider, for example, two carpenters working on the construction of the same house. One finds the job tedious. He looks forward to completing his present task—say, laying the foundation—only so that he begin the next: building a wall. Indeed, what he really wants is for the whole job to be over, and as a result he cannot stop looking at the clock. He looks forward to the end of the day when he will go home, and the end of the week when he will receive his paycheck. The second carpenter finds the work engaging and becomes immersed in the single task she is performing. She is surprised when her shift is over. For her, time flies.

In a similar vein, consider the difference between a professional basketball player and an amateur. The former seeks to win prizes, achieve fame and accumulate wealth. To attain these goals she trains rigorously, adheres to a strict diet, and methodically practices her moves. She feels despair when she loses or does poorly in front of the many spectators who watch her play and significant stress before competing. Her life is complicated and difficult, for it is in thrall to a goal beyond the activity itself. By contrast, the amateur plays for no prize, and no spectators watch his games. He simply enjoys the activity as a refreshing break from ordinary life. He tries hard to win, and thus plays with intensity—and is thoroughly immersed in doing so—but he knows deep down that victory is not that for the sake of which he plays. He is just enjoying a pleasurable activity.

The point of these examples is this: two people can be doing the same thing but one may experience it as pleasurable and the other as

11 Here I am following what Aristotle says about pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4. For example, “the form of pleasure is complete (τέλειον) at any given moment” (1179a5–6). I am not claiming any line of influence.

disagreeable. What differentiates the two is the degree to which the agents are immersed in the activity itself; the degree to which they are present and lose track of time.

This, I propose, was Aristippus' insight: what makes an activity pleasurable cannot be found in its particular content. It could be building a house or playing basketball, lying with a beautiful courtesan or being spat upon by Dionysius. Instead, what matters is whether someone is immersed in, and does not look beyond, the activity itself; in other words, whether someone is "in" the present. For this is the source of pleasure itself.

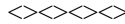
Interesting empirical evidence for the truth of this hypothesis comes from the field of "disaster studies." For example, researchers have found that survivors of catastrophic events (such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the bombing of London during World War II) often report having experienced what Rebecca Solnit describes as "strange pleasure" and "startling sharp joy."¹² One reason is that the overwhelming magnitude of a disaster utterly concentrates the victims' attention on the present. In turn, as Charles Fritz suggests, this can produce "a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions, and anxieties associated with the past and the future."¹³ Being immersed in the present, however awful it may be, can thus have a therapeutic effect.

Even if this claim has merit it only leads to the next question: why is being-in-the-present pleasurable? The answer has already been suggested: precisely because it takes us out of the flow of time. But, again, why is this pleasurable? Because, as Aristotle wrote in the *Physics*, "time dissolves everything, and everything gets old at the hands of time, and everything is forgotten on account of time" (221a33-34). As such, our awareness of transience, particularly the impending future, is the source of our "worries, inhibitions and anxieties." For this reason standing outside of the flow of time—or rather, feeling as if we stand outside of it—is, as Fritz puts it, "a temporary liberation," a

12 Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell* (NY: Penguin, 2020), p. 6, 7.

13 Fritz, Charles E., "Disasters and Mental Health" (University of Delaware Disaster Research Center, 1996), p. 62, 61, 55. Also see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1174b7-9

lightening of the load. It gives us a taste of eternity—or as Solnit puts it, a “glimpse of paradise”¹⁴—and is thus experienced as pleasure.



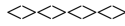
Aristippus claimed that educated people were like “trained horses” (οἱ δεδασμασμένοι ἵπποι: II.69). Perhaps, then, he trained his own students—his would-be fellow hedonists—to concentrate on the present. Perhaps he explained to them that when Dionysius spat on him he gave no thought to how his reputation would suffer (in the future). Instead, he paid attention only to the feeling of a viscous liquid on his face; a feeling not intrinsically unpleasant. When someone took him to task for passively enduring such an insult he replied thus:

Well, the fishermen put up with being sprinkled by the sea in order to catch the sardine; so should I not put up with being sprinkled with spittle, that I may catch the anchovy? (II.67).

As Mensch reports in a footnote to her translation of this passage, “the Greek word for “anchovy,” *blennos*, also means ‘drooler.’ So by an ingenious pun, Dionysius, the ‘fish’ Aristippus hopes to catch, is made to seem a drivelling fool.”¹⁵ In other words, Aristippus overcame the petty cruelty of the tyrant by enjoying himself, which he did by concentrating on the present sensation of drool on his face, and disregarding its social connotations and implications. How to do this is perhaps what he taught his students.

14 Solnit 2020, p. 8. While Solnit does indeed address the manner in which a disaster situates people “in the here and now” (p. 5), she puts far more emphasis on the feeling of social solidarity that emerges in times of crisis. Also, see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* X.1174b7-9: “motion (κινεῖσθαι) is possible only in time (ἐν χρόνῳ), while pleasure [is not in time] (ἡδεσθαι δέ), for it is in the now (ἐν τῷ νῦν) and something whole (ὅλον τι).”

15 Mensch (2018), p. 96.



Because it concentrated on the present and made no effort to maximize future pleasures or minimize pains, Aristippus' hedonism is puzzling. So too is the fact that he was a "Socratic" (Σωκρατικῶν: II.65) who had received his "education" (παιδείας: II.80) from Socrates himself. But how could this be? After all, Aristippus openly enjoyed courtesans and extravagant feasting while Socrates (at least as reported by Plato) once said, "surely you don't think that a philosophical man (ἄνθρωπος) takes seriously the so-called pleasures, such as eating and drinking?" (*Phaedo* 64d)?¹⁶

Nonetheless, despite his hijinks Aristippus did follow in the footsteps of his teacher. For he was both an ironist and a gadfly.¹⁷

As mentioned above, when he said that he had "mastered" pleasure he was not referring to abstinence. Instead, his stance was more peculiar than that, for he both deemed present pleasure the highest good and denied that he was a "lover of pleasure." This seemingly contradictory stance—take it or leave it—parallels the seemingly contradictory nature of the present. It has no duration and yet is somehow a gateway between before and after. It is thus impossible for any human experience, pleasurable or otherwise, actually to be in the present, for to be so would require being-out-of-time. On the other hand, for those who are gripped by pleasure this is surely the way it feels. They are enjoying themselves and thus have no inclination to look at the clock. They feel themselves as being, however speciously, in the moment.¹⁸ In our very experience of what we take to be the present there is thus a kind of irony.

16 As mentioned in footnote #2, in the *Protagoras* Socrates does seem to espouse a form of hedonism. My own view, argued elsewhere, is that this an *ad hominem* argument as well as a *reductio*.

17 For Socrates irony see Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*. Especially note the mention of his irony (εἰρωνικῶς) at 218d6. For Socrates as "gadfly" see *Apology* 30e6.

18 Naturally this brings to mind what William James said about the present. It "is, in fact, an altogether ideal abstraction, not only never realized in sense, but probably never even conceived of by those unaccustomed to philosophic meditation. Reflection leads us to the conclusion that it *must* exist, but that it *does* exist can never be a fact of our immediate experience. The only fact of our immediate experience is what Mr. E. R. Clay has well called 'the *specious* present.'" James then quotes Clay: what we typically call

Aristippus' ironic hedonism—his valorization of pleasure as well as his indifference to any given particular pleasure—gave him a platform on which he could be, like his teacher, a “gadfly.” His behavior, as well as his words, were designed to wake people up from their thoughtless embrace of conventional goods. By insisting that he “enjoyed the pleasure of what was present, and did not toil to procure the enjoyment of things not present,” he challenged the standard view that the best life is spent in the toilsome pursuit of money, power and fame. And even though he himself partook of food, wine and women, his indifference to them—“I have Laïs but she not me”—made clear that in his mind they too were insubstantial, and he could take them or leave them. What mattered to Aristippus was not any particular pleasure, but simply being-in-the-present. A notion that is as radical, disruptive and perplexing as Socrates himself.

the present “is really a part of the past—a recent past—delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future.” James argued that the duration of the specious present was between a few seconds and a minute. See Chapter XV, “The Perception of Time,” in *The Principles of Psychology*. The text can be found at <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin15.htm>The Principles of Psychology.

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