

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2021 at 3:22 PM

My comment would be that all of those are largely correct, but that taken together they tend toward conveying a premise of under-shooting the goal of maximizing pleasure.

Once you realize that "pleasure" is not limited to any certain type of pleasure (and I think the texts are very clear in that regard) I think it becomes clear that the point is not to focus on some pre-existing category of pleasure (such as luxurious or simple) but to look for what *you* in your own personal experience value the most, and which can be attained without a level of pain you find not worth it.

In other words, while the goal is maximum pleasure / minimum pain, there's no absolute standard for either one, and you most certainly should not focus on "zero pain" as the overriding goal.

It's clear from the texts that we have to expect pain in life, and that we can manage it because intense pain is short, and minor pains, even if long, are readily endurable. Endurable for what purpose? For the sake of pleasure! And with the realization that since we have only a short time to live, any pleasure we will ever experience in eternity has to come when we are alive.

So I would argue that it is a huge mistake to focus on "minimum pain" as the goal - as many people argue Epicurus taught. I think of it this way:

Any realistic life scenario is going to contain a mixture of pleasurable times and painful times. The goal should be, little by little, (or as fast as you can, whichever is possible) to one by one remove the painful times and replace them with pleasurable times.

One illustration is the jelly bean jar that starts off half full of jelly beans (pleasure) and half full of air (pain). One by one you can add jelly beans (pleasures) to the jar, and gradually reduce the air (pain) in the jar.

But the point of the illustration is this: Once you get the jar nearly filled with jelly beans, and you have only one bean's quantity of air (pain) left, what do you have when you replace that last space with a jellybean?

Yes, you have total absence of pain, which is the goal. But the **reason** you now have total absence of pain is that you have filled the jar with jelly beans, and the presence of those jelly beans is what amounts to the life of total pleasure /absence of pain.

The implication of the ascetic viewpoint is that by replacing that last empty space with the final jelly bean, you somehow magically transform the jar of jelly beans into something totally different -- something that they now label "absence of pain" but for which they ignore the jar

full of jelly beans that produced it!

Likewise, there is no way to ever produce a jar full of jelly beans (the life full of pleasure) by simply removing jelly beans, because there is no magic jelly beans that when totally removed constitute a life full of pleasure.

And equally to the point, there is no master list of "worthy" jelly beans that you must go looking for to put in the jar that are cosmically better than others. If you put only a few jelly beans in your jar and stop there, you end up with a jar full mostly with air (pain).

Now in the end everyone has free will to decide how to stock their own jelly bean jar. And if they decide that one or two jelly beans in the bottom of the jar is the best they can do (and that may in fact sometimes happen) then that is up to them. Their decision to stop filling the jar of jelly beans may be the best they can do, and they can take satisfaction in those jelly beans and treasure them. But if they stop short with only a few jelly beans when it was readily in their power to gather more, and the cost of those additional jelly beans would have been manageable for them (they judged the pain to be worth the effort) then I am afraid that we have a tragic picture where a lot of that air/pain will come from "regret" -- that they could have had more pleasure, but simply chose not to pursue it. That's a tragic decision if it could have been otherwise, but if it's a result of outside forces that misled them, or then that's a time for philosophical campaign against those who did the misleading! 😊

But when the option is there for the person to do so, why would a person ever stop filling his or her jar with jelly beans, so long as it is in their capacity to fill the jar as much as possible, at a cost in pain they find acceptable?

I believe Epicurus taught that that is the best way to express the goal of life: As "Torquatus" said: "*Let us imagine a man living in **the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind**, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?. [The Reid version is more literal: "*

*Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures **great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily**, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable?"]*

Or as Cicero himself said in a particularly pithy variation: "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that ... that *nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.*"