

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by “Martin” of October 6, 2021 at 6:35 AM

Intensity of pleasure is usually limited in time by control loops in our body (e.g. lack of ability to get aroused after an orgasm, getting used to the particular pleasure, exhaustion, overstimulation) or by the nature of the activity.

In general, I attempt to feel the easy to get pleasure of low intensity for most of the time and intense pleasure only occasionally. If intense pleasure comes as a surprise without having expected it and without the typically painful preparation for it, I of course try to enjoy the experience as much as possible.

As pleasure depends heavily on the individual, here are some practical examples:

One of the greatest pleasures I have experienced so far is flying along ziplines high up through spectacular scenery. A flight along one zipline usually takes much less than a minute, so the intense pleasure is naturally limited to a very short time. (I wish there were 10 km long ziplines). In terms of pain, zipline flying requires long travel to go to the respective place, it is expensive, the effort might be in vain because the operator might block me from the ziplines because of high blood pressure or bad weather, and pain in the form of anxiety of height might kill the pleasure. The risk of injury and death seems to be so low that it does not show up in my hedonic calculus but for others that might be relevant.

The listed pains (in particular the waste of time for travel and the risks of travel) make me pursue the desire for zipline flights only rarely. However, the expectation of the intense pleasure makes me plan for more zipline flights in the future. So far, I have 2 new places on my bucket list, may add more as I find them near where I travel anyway and might go again to places where I have been already if other reasons for travel get me near them.

I took the opportunity of floating in a vertical wind canal when business travel brought me in walking distance to one. It was a pleasure but not as great as I expected, apparently because it requires skill and experience. I expect the pleasure to increase greatly after gaining the skill and experience. In case there is a wind tunnel near a place where I happen to stay for an extended period and cost of access is moderate, I would probably do this often because of the expectation of great pleasure although the duration of the pleasure is always short by the nature of the activity.

I never did skydiving with a parachute from a plane. I am not sure whether I would pursue an easy opportunity for skydiving. The reported pleasure of free fall is attractive but the pain in terms of fear of flight on a plane and possibly intense fear of heights is a deterrent.

I would probably not pursue an opportunity for a zero gravity flight or a space flight because the result of the hedonic calculus is negative for me.

Another one of the greatest pleasures I have experienced so far is falling asleep together with my wife (ex-wife since recently, sigh) while hugging each other. It is limited in time in 2 different ways:

If I actually fall asleep within minutes, the onset of deep sleep terminates the conscious and memorable experience of the pleasure.

If I stay fully awake for several minutes with no indication of falling asleep soon, boredom kicks in, and the increasing desire to do something converts the experience from pleasure to pain.

Another great pleasure was indulging in chocolate mousse. Many years ago, a chain restaurant provided it in a big bowl as part of its buffet. It was the main motivation for me to eat at that restaurant. By going repeatedly to the bowl and filling a small plate with a moderate amount, I ended up with a meal with more than 50% chocolate mousse by volume, and as it was a buffet meal, the whole meal meant gross overeating way beyond feeling no more hungry and stopping just short of discomfort. At that time, I ignored the risk of accelerated onset of diabetes from excessive intake of sugar.

Then, the restaurant changed to provide the chocolate mousse only in small cups. I felt too embarrassed to take many of these cups, so I ended up eating much less chocolate mousse, at most 3 cups.

Eventually, I wanted to reduce the risk of diabetes by excluding most foods with substantial amounts of sugar. I gradually reduced the number of cups to just one and got accustomed to the shortened duration of the intense pleasure of eating chocolate mousse and to appreciate the less intense pleasure of eating other food. I changed my habit further from choosing the cup which was filled with the most amount of mousse to the one which had the least.

After a while of strongly reduced sugar intake, I lost the craving for chocolate mousse and stopped eating it at that chain restaurant, to which I still go once a week when I stay near one.