

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

How would you interpret "the most pleasant"?

First, I am going to attempt at least for a while not to "like" too many posts here in this thread, as sometimes the "likes" tend to mean taking sides when "sides" is a bad thing to do. Who knows whether any of us at this point have the "right" interpretation? (We can come back to likes later, though, cause they do help with things over time, for those who are "persistent" in following arguments.) 😊

I guess further I need to be sure what we mean by "right" interpretation, which I'll define for my use as "what Epicurus intended" (not necessarily what I myself might think.)

Second, I think that my starting point as above is that in the Epicurean universe there can be no single definition of the right answer here. This is why I try to emphasize "pleasure as a feeling" and that's the big implication of it being a feeling -- feelings are largely subjective and at least highly difficult (and probably impossible) to quantify in any objectively-measurable terms. "Time" is a pretty easy measure, and I personally think "intensity" is another good term, and I think I recall in some of the recent psychology material that you (Don) and Godfrey have posted another term ("affect"?). But even more than that I think that there are probably lots of other aspects that can be described and I don't think we can or should try to pin down pleasure to a limited set of categories.

That's also what I mean much of the time when I set off Pleasure or Feeling against the Platonic Ideals or the Religious "revelation" -- I see "pleasure" as a sweeping term that includes all "positive" feelings/sensations from any sense or mental activity, and in that status as "the positive feeling," I think the big philosophical war is between Idealism v. Divine Revelation vs Feeling (or Pleasure). (I am considering Idealism as essentially non-theistic in that list, even though I know Plato's version was essentially theistic if you drill down far enough - that's why idealism and revelation get along so well to fight Epicurus.)

So with all that as background I interpret "most pleasant" as a feeling that we generate (or receive) within ourselves as the most valuable to us "in total." I do think that it is reasonable to look at time (duration and persistence) as an important element, but equally or more important is "intensity" (maybe "depth" is a better word?). For example that is why I think Epicurus said that it is at times appropriate to die for a friend. The depth of pain that you would suffer from knowing that a friend died who you could have saved could be (or I could see it being) so deep and intense that no amount of time would be sufficient to make like worth living after that, so

you go ahead and sacrifice your life as the proper hedonic calculus of how to proceed in such an awful situation.

I know I keep talking about pleasure being subjective and up to the individual to evaluate, and I think that's an unsatisfying way of expressing it because it's an attempt to address the problem through "logic" and "definitions."

Probably the better approach would be to point to particular feelings of love and affection you have, such as for a spouse or a child (or whatever) that we all can identify with. Then you can point and say those are examples which allow us to understand the feelings involved so that we can unwind the question. All of us are probably familiar with the examples of how lovers talk about if they only had "one more day" with their departed love one they would sacrifice everything, or one more day to spend with a departed parent or child. I think those are examples of deep and intense emotion and are probably the hard cases that help establish the point.

Some pleasures are so intense and so deep and so important to us that no lesser pleasures, no matter the duration or persistence, can stack up to them in our own estimation, and if asked to choose between them we would unhesitatingly choose the deep/intense over the longer more persistent duration.