

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2021 at 11:47 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I interpret that "the most pleasant" with the idea of pleasure *over a period of time.* The *length* of time is not the focus; it's the *persistence* of pleasure over the time in question.

First, I should slightly amend that statement. I'll add:

Quote from Don, revised

I interpret that phrase "the most pleasant" with as the idea of pleasures maintained *over a period of time.* The *length* of time is not the focus; it's the *persistence* of pleasure writ large over the time in question.

That's why Epicurus can say "[We choose] not the longest time but that in which one enjoys the fruits of that which brings the greatest pleasure."

This coincides with Fragment 116:

Quote from Plutarch, citing Epicurus

116. I summon you to sustained enjoyment and not to empty and trifling virtues, which destroy your confidence in the fruits of what you have. Plut. Adv. Col. 17

There's some disagreement on how that last phrase should be translated evidently, but, for my purposes here the first part is the important one. "Sustained enjoyment" in this translation is ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς hedonas sunekheis, literally, "continuous/continual/unremitting pleasures" That "continuous/continual" is where I'm getting Epicurus's summons to us to have been to experience continuous pleasure throughout our life. To make choices to make sure pleasures "persist" throughout our life, no matter the length of that life.

I'm also drawing on my recent "re-discovery" of Cicero thanks to you when "Torquatus" says:

Quote from Cicero, De Finibus

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind...

or, as Reid, translates:

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 ;

So, again, we make choices that will lead to a life of "continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures." Pleasure is maintained throughout one's life.

From my perspective, it is not the "time" involved in the *individual* pleasure that's most (or even) important. The important things are the choices we make to continue to experience pleasures great, numerous, and constant throughout our life.

Your spreadsheet and focus on time or intensity or depth gets away from the idea that the number of pleasures is "great" and "numerous." It doesn't matter, I don't think, how deep, intense, or prolonged any individual pleasure is. It's the idea that we should imbue our entire lives with "continuous enjoyment" of "numerous" pleasures.

Your friendship example strikes me as bolstering my point. If you fail to protect your friend, you will spend the rest of your life regretting their loss and your failure to come to their aid. The pain will "persist" throughout your life. However, if you lose your life doing something for the "pleasure" of your friendship, your "pleasure" is maintained throughout your life no matter if it is cut short. This also strikes me as a warning/exhortation to "pluck the day" *carpe diem* when it is available. There is no guarantee of tomorrow.

You're right. Don wasn't around for the spreadsheet discussion. I joined in Feb 2020. The spreadsheet and numbers remind me too much of [Bentham's hedons and dolors in his felicific calculus](#) for my taste, a little too Utilitarian for me.

So, I will say, your visceral reaction to my response actually surprised me. I didn't see it as controversial at all. And I realize these responses here aren't going to convince you, but I feel concentrating on the trees of worrying about the intensity or depth or duration of an individual pleasure takes our attention away from the forest of pleasure to which Epicurus is calling us to experience.