

# Why Do We Focus On "Pleasure" as the Goal and the Good, Rather than "Happiness?"

Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2018 at 12:47 PM

Here is another way of stating my summary of this problem but it requires background:

As a first background item, Stoics and others do not like the idea of "pleasure" at all - they find it virtuousness, so they deprecate pleasure and extol pain. From such a perspective there is very little in a philosophy of pleasure which they can find to latch onto, and they have to go looking very hard at Epicurean philosophy to find anything with which they can identify.

As a second background item, Epicurus wrote his letter to Menoecus in a context where the prevailing analysis of Pleasure was that expressed by Plato in [Philebus](#). Very few people today have time to read that, but if you were a student of philosophy in Athens you would have known that Plato said pleasure could not be the guide of life because the desire for pleasure is insatiable - can never be satisfied - and therefore something else is more important, and that something else is using wisdom/reason as a regulator to stop overindulgence in pleasure. Epicurus answered that objection to his students by showing them that pleasure does have a limit, and that limit is reached when our experience is full of pleasure, all pain has thereby been expelled from our experience. As a corollary of that observation, Epicurus pointed out that since our experience is full of either pleasure or pain, the \*quantity\* of pleasure is exactly equal to the quantity of experience in which there is no pain - so in that quantitative perspective, the amount of pleasure equals the amount of where pain is absent, or in summary terms, "pleasure = absence of pain."

So these two combined set the stage. Epicurus was talking to people who understood his analysis that experience is either pleasure or pain, so the quantity argument was crystal clear to them. But the STOICS and others who dislike pleasure jumped on the equation "pleasure = absence of pain" and they lifted it out of the \*quantity\* context to argue that pleasure IN EVERY RESPECT equals absence of pain. This is **\*\*nonsense\*\***, but they can quote the text out of context and appear to use Epicurus himself in support of their argument.

And so the favorite technique of those who cannot believe, or cannot agree, with Epicurus that pleasure is the meaning of life transmute the argument so that Epicurus is alleged to have said that this term "absence of pain" is the full meaning of life. Again, this is nonsense, but it relieves them of defending the term "pleasure" allows them to embrace Epicurus, and allows them to say that Epicurus was a proto-Stoic or a proto-Buddhist or whatever kind of ascetic suits their personal preference.

In my view this is why the definition of happiness and of pleasure itself is so controversial, and

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why so much time is spend arguing it. If by the terms of our definitions we can write "pleasure" out of existence and define both pleasure and happiness as "absence of pain" or some other amorphous ambiguous term, the the thread of Epicurean philosophy ever meaning anything to ordinary people is thoroughly extinguished.