

Maximum pleasure as absence of all pain: a philosophical question concerning neuroscientific and Epicurean outlook toward the feeling of pleasure

Post by “Cassius” of January 20, 2024 at 5:24 AM

Shahab here is my answer to this excellent question. i think this part of your question leads to the answer:

[Quote from shahabgh66](#)

From a neuroscientific outlook, when brain produces any of these six hormones of Endorphins, Dopamine, Oxytocin, Norepinephrine, Cortisol and Adrenaline, one feels pleasure.

You'd have to go through each of those hormones to describe them more specifically, but for the moment let's consider those hormones to be the biological expression of what most people often refer to as the pleasure - an agreeable stimulation felt by the senses.

When you read through the discussion that remains in Diogenes Laertius and Cicero as to how Epicurus was defining his terms, Epicurus was not limiting pleasure to an agreeable biological stimulation felt by the senses. Epicurus was specifically taking the position that whether the feeling arises from stimulation or simple awareness, there are two and only two categories of feelings, pleasure and pain, with no middle ground or third condition. All feelings in life, whether stimulated or not, are considered by definition to fall within either one category or the other. If you are conscious of your condition at all, you are at all times feeling either one or the other. While you can feel many things at one time in separate parts of your mind and body, a single feeling at any part of your mind and body at a particular moment is one or the other never both or some third condition. For example as to the feelings being two:

Diogenes Laertius 10:34 : *"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."*

On Ends 1:30 : *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*

As to the assertion that you are feeling either one or the other at all times:

On Ends 1:38: *Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."*

As to the two conditions being separate and unmixed in any particular feeling:

PD03 : *"The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once ."*

All of those taken together mean that Epicurus did not limit pleasure to what we generally think of as sensory stimulation, but included within pleasure all states of awareness of life that are not felt to be painful. You can see an explicit example of that here in regard to discussion of one's hand in its normal state of affairs, whenever it is not in some affirmative pain:

On Ends 1:39 : *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.*

You also see this position being asserted in comparing the conditions of two people who are not in pain, but who are seemingly in very different conditions: A host at a party who is pouring wine to a guest who is drinking it. Here is the example:

On Ends 2:16 : *"This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?" [Torquatus objects to the question as quibbling but the implicit answer is "yes" based on the condition of "not being thirsty" and "the thirsty man who drinks" both being conditions of pleasure.]*

This means that Epicurus was defining all conditions of awareness where pain is not present to be pleasure. It's significant to remember "conditions of awareness" because he is not saying that a rock, which is not feeling pain, to be feeling pleasure. Only the living can feel pleasure or pain, but when you are aware of your condition all of your feelings can be categorized as either painful or pleasurable. You can see this sweeping categorization stated specifically here:

On Ends 2:9 : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be."

On Ends 2:11: Cicero: Still, I replied, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible."

This is how Epicurus can say that the wise man is continuously feeling pleasure, and how he defines the absence of pain as the highest pleasure. He is not talking about the most intense stimulation, he is talking philosophically about the most pure and complete condition of pleasure where pleasure is defined as a condition where absolutely all pain is gone. The wise man is about to consider this condition to be the most complete pleasure even though it is not the most intense stimulation:

On Ends 1:56 : *By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy.*

On Ends 1:62 : *But these doctrines may be stated in a certain manner so as not merely to disarm our criticism, but actually to secure our sanction. For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with*

thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

So as I see it your question is a variation of what gets asked all the time: How can a condition of absence of pain be considered pleasure? The answer is that absence of pain can be considered to be pleasure, and in fact the total absence of pain can be considered to be the highest pleasure, ***because we are considering pleasure to include not just sensory stimulation, but also to include all conditions of awareness of life, mental or bodily, which are not painful, regardless of whether those conditions result from stimulation or from simple awareness of pain-free existence.***

One or more of those hormones you refer to may or may not be something that we can consider to be the result of awareness of non-painful existence. Or all of those hormones may be the result of some kind of "stimulation." Sort of like with the issue of the word "atom" being meant to refer to something that is indivisible, rather than specifically to atoms or subatomic particles I think Epicurus would say that no matter how you slice your hormones or any other parts of biological awareness, what we are doing in describing pleasure is not looking at the structure but at the effect that is felt. Atoms are "whatever matter is indivisible" and Pleasure is "whatever feeling is not painful."

This may appear to be a word game, but it is not. It is the assertion that the normal healthy default condition of life is and should be considered to be pleasurable whenever it is not painful. I think Norman DeWitt says it best:

"Epicurus And His Philosophy" page 240 (emphasis added)

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing."

So Shahab for me personally, when I think about the fact that for an eternity before I was born I felt nothing at all, and for an eternity after I die I will feel nothing at all, I have no problem at all considering to be pleasure all of my non-painful awareness in this brief period when I am alive.