

# The Axiology of Pain and Pleasure (are they intrinsic good/bad ? )

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2024 at 5:25 PM

The term "grand philosophical point" was introduced by Don in post 31:

## [Quote from Don](#)

I'll have to dig back in, but I don't think the language supports that interpretation, especially in light of the letter to Menoikeus. It seems to me he's giving practical advice in [PD10](#), not necessarily making a grand philosophical point. I see this as directly countering the Cyrenaic position.

Here's the way I would unwind the reason this dance seems to continue, because I think it's a deep issue that we see in many forms, including the nearby "astronaut" discussion.

As I perceive why Don used that term, there is an ongoing perspective question about Epicurus' use of concepts and whether he is primarily making practical points or clinical points. Is he giving personal advice about pleasure and how to pursue it moment by moment, or is he giving philosophical advice about how Plato et al are wrong, so that by examining the words that people are using we can make the differences between the schools clear. Or is he (more likely) working on both goals, since the statements he is making can be seen as true on both levels.

The point that I think generates the controversy is that there is a certain perspective held by many people that manifests itself (rightly!) in the reluctance to engage in hypotheticals or to adopt non-standard usages of words. Epicurus himself apparently refused to acknowledge the necessity to prove the desirability of pleasure, presumably for that very reason. On the other hand, Epicurus insisted on talking about "gods" as really existing, even though he sliced away from them most of the defining characteristics that most people consider to be essential about them (supernatural, omniscient, omnipotent).

It seems to me that Epicurus clearly did "both" because if you're going to engage in philosophy you've got to explain your terms to at least some degree. Right after Torquatus noted Epicurus' reluctance to prove the desirability of pleasure by logical philosophical debate, he goes off on a long discourse that sounds very much like a logical philosophical argument. I would say that's a necessity of engaging in philosophical debate, rather than a departure from Epicurean precedent, and that Epicurus himself was doing the exact same kind of combination of logic and "pointing attention to" in statements like [PD10-12](#), and the letter to Menoecus.

It seems to me that this is the only realistic way to account for the "flatness" of Epicurus' choice to categorize all the many shades of feelings (which Cicero and everyone else in the world

recognizes as different from each other) into only one of two categories, pleasure or pain. It seems to me that this flatness is a logical necessity when you accept the challenge of using only a single word to distinguish what is desirable, and a single word to distinguish what is undesirable. Rather than "virtue" or "piety," "pleasure" has to stand in that position of the single word that constitutes the placeholder for all that is desirable.

That's how it seems to me it makes most sense to read these flat "either-or" positions:

**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."*

And I see that as the only reasonable way to understand the flatness of the exchanges between Torquatus and Cicero in On Ends:

**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?"*

**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."*

**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.*

**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: "Clearly the same, he says, and indeed the greatest, beyond which none greater can possibly be."

Those are flat uses of the word "pleasure" that defy common usage, and yet they are logically consistent with defining pleasure as "everything in life that is desirable" as opposed to "everything in life that is undesirable."

Since Torquatus seemed to take the position that it is essential to use the terminology in this way, and since Torquatus had access to the teachers and the books that we do not, it seems to be it is reasonable to interpret the letter to Menoecus, the PD's, and the other original writings in the same way that they were being interpreted by the people who had reason to know the intent behind them.

----

But I will agree that taking words in these unusual ways is a tough nut for a lot of people to follow. It's normal to object to hypotheticals, and normal to object to non-standard uses of words. In the end I think we're really wrestling with questions of how to communicate when we are using words in non-standard ways. One logical way to do that is to state things in extremes: we come up with formulations that sound like *We have no cause for complaint about those who actually achieve pleasure even if we consider that pleasure to be depraved.* This second statements rings the same way: *We woud have no need for anything - even natural science that we all love - and which I've told you brings me my greatest pleasure - if we were to be able to achieve a life of pleasure without it.* Those seem to me to be stated in extreme ways, not to focus on the practical (there are a lot better ways to give practical advice than to cite extreme situations) but to make exactly the point that "pleasure" should be understood in the widest possible way as everything in life that is desirable, and pain everything in life that is undesirable.

Extreme and hypothetical formulations appear absurd to those who focus on the "practical" side alone, but maintaining the philosophical side is essential to understanding the difference between the schools is really as deep as it is - it's the only way to come up with a logically rigorous worldview.

The "astroanaut" hypothetical comes into play because the common perception is that Epicurus is all about being satisfied with what you have and not asking "too much" out of life -- which I don't think is an accurate characterization, but if accepted would make it extremely unlikely that anyone would strap themselves onto the top of a rocket -- even one made by a manufacturer with better recent luck than Boeing!

So to wrap this into a bow, one way of looking at the "grand philosophical point" is how to view Epicurus' use of the term "pleasure." When Epicurus was using it was he focusing on describing specific feelings of the moment at particular times and places, or was he using it philosophically (as his "grand philosophical point") to represent the ultimate good, as against the opposing alternatives of "virtue" or "piety" or "reason," or was he doing both?