

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

Post by "Don" of June 4, 2024 at 11:47 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

you and Don have a history

This made me chuckle... I don't know whether I'd phrase it in quite that same way, but point taken 😊 I went back and looked, and [our "history" goes all the way back to 2020](#) (and back when I was using a nom de plume... or de guerre, as the case might be 😊)!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(respectfully!) 😊

Fully agree we need keep this difference of opinion/perspective respectful and civil!

I agree with both [Little Rocker](#) and [Cassius](#) that using terms like "psychological hedonism" don't advance the conversation in a meaningful way, and the phrase wouldn't be a useful explanation to the general reader or someone curiously coming across Epicurean philosophy. That said, I stand by my conviction [outlined in post #28 above](#): Humans are "psychological hedonists" and one of Epicurus's significant "discoveries" was to point this out and try to harness this tendency to allow us to live more pleasurable lives.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Looking at things in a conceptually rigorous way, "IF a life of debauchery did in fact bring a pleasurable life" means that for purposes of discussion we are accepting that result -- and thus we would have no problem with such a person.

IF! This is all a re-hash of my position back in 2020, for the most part. The key word there is "IF". *IF x, then y*. IF it was the case...\*then\* we would have no problem. And, yes, IF it was the case *the things that produce the delights of the life* of "one having no hope of safety, in desperate case; one who is, in a moral sense, abandoned; profligate" did what? If those things "washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and furthermore if they taught us the limits of our pains and desires" \*then\* we'd have no problem with them. But those \*things\* don't wash away the fears. They're pleasurable activities, and Epicurus never denies that. But those things alone won't get us down the road to dispelling fears. It seems to me he's saying you have get the fears dispelled first... then you can enjoy

various "delights" unencumbered by those fears.

[PD10-12](#) has to be read in the context of the Letter to Menoikeus (my translation):

*Therefore, whenever we say repeatedly that "pleasure is the goal (τέλος)," we do NOT say the pleasure of those who are prodigal\* and those stuck in delighting in pleasures arising from circumstances outside of ourselves like:*

- those who are ignorant
- those who don't agree with us, or
- those who believe wrongly;

*but we mean that which neither pains the body nor troubles the mind. [132] For it is NOT an endless string of drinking parties and festivals, and NOT taking advantage of slaves and women, nor does an extravagant table of fish and other things bring forth a sweet life but self-controlled reasoning and examining the cause of every choice and rejection and driving out the greatest number of opinions that take hold of the mind and bring confusion and trouble. (emphasis added)*

\*ἄσωτος This is the same exact word in the Greek that is used in [PD10](#).

That section of the letter, to me, clearly states "we do NOT say the pleasure of those who are profligate" when we say "pleasure is the goal (τέλος)." There's no equivocation and no hypothetically-speaking. οὐ τὰς τῶν ἄσωτων ἡδονὰς = not the pleasure of the profligate.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

From my perspective, Epicurus does both but in different writings and in different contexts. [Principal Doctrines](#) was meant to give an overview of the philosophy and advice on how to apply and understand the philosophy, I'm assuming, primarily for students of the Epicurean school and as a quick primer for those curious about the school. Same for the letters: hit the high points and provide instruction on how to apply the philosophy to struggling students. I don't necessarily think he needs to be working on both goals in every piece of writing.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

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 took me a minute to understand what you meant by "flatness" but I get it: You're referring to the "flat" hierarchy of two feelings: pleasure/pain. There's only two branches of the tree. I would rather characterize it as an expansive inclusion within those two feelings. This still makes sense the more I think about it: When you're alive, you're either feeling pleasure or pain, because you're always feeling \*something\*... If you didn't you'd be dead. It may be subtle, it may be sharp, it may be intense... but you're always feeling something. There are innumerable "feelings" and emotions within those two categories, but every sensation is either pleasurable or painful. That seems to be a very insightful discovery, and seems to be born out by current psychological affective research... but we're not going down that road 😊

Finally, I don't think Epicurus is necessarily redefining "virtue". It seems to me that "virtue" to Epicurus still means generally "to do what society feels is the excellent/noble thing to do" but for Epicurus we do it because it brings us pleasure, both as the feeling and leading to a more pleasurable life (i.e., [PD05](#)) Virtue has no intrinsic value \*other than\* to serve as an instrument leading to pleasure. And now pleasure *is* widely defined!

[Cassius](#) : I know you feel strongly about these points you're making, and I can respect that passion. I don't expect to "change your mind." But, I'll admit, after reading my thread from 2020, I seem to be a little pig-headed (Epicurean pun firmly intended) in the opinion I hold.