

Eudaimonia and Makariotēs in the Letter to Menoecus

Post by "Cassius" of May 31, 2026 at 3:03 AM

I just noticed something about this article that should have jumped out at me from the beginning. My failure to notice it reinforces to me that there's a test that above all others ought to be applied in evaluating any discussion of Epicurean ethics.

The test is: "How often and how clearly and how strongly does the discussion mention *pleasure*?"

So let me apply that test here, just as I hope people will apply that to my own articles on these subjects.

In this case, the first mention of pleasure occurs in the second paragraph, but only to exclude "temporary pleasure" from the meaning of Epicurean happiness.

The next mention of pleasure does not occur until the table near the end of the article, where the fourth of six items under happiness is stated to be "A stable life with many more pleasures than pains."

The only other and final mention is in the next-to-last paragraph, where "enjoys prudent pleasures" is the third of three items listed as allowing one to obtain happiness.

Apparently even in the ancient world Diogenes of Oinoanda felt it necessary to "shout loudly" about this issue:

But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life....

And nothing could be more clear than the way Torquatus expressed it:

[54] But if the encomium passed even on the virtues themselves, over which the eloquence of all other philosophers especially runs riot, can find no vent unless it be referred to pleasure, and pleasure is the only thing which invites us to the pursuit of itself, and attracts us by reason of its own nature, then there can be no doubt that of all things good it is the supreme and ultimate good, and that a life of happiness means nothing else but a life attended by pleasure.

In other contexts here on the forum we are discussing the problem of the rhetorical choice to portray Epicurus as a philosopher of withdrawal, resignation, and primarily relief from pain,

rather than as the philosopher whose ethics focuses on a life of pleasure and who said that:

[129] *And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.*

Note that pleasure is the standard by which we judge every good. That means that pleasure is the standard by which we judge the existence and desirability of both happiness and blessedness - not the other way around.

The letter to Menoecus itself provides more than a few opportunities to stress the primary place of pleasure in Epicurean philosophy. When that doesn't happen, it's an important reminder to all of us that there are powerful pressures at work -- even among those of us who admire Epicurus -- that cause us to downplay the role of pleasure in discussing ethics.

At least here at EpicureanFriends, those pressures need to be called out and "shouted" down, just as Epicurus himself in writing to Menoecus pointed out that he himself was being misrepresented and misunderstood.

Certainly happiness and blessedness are important and useful terms, and it is helpful to talk about them. But we should never let pleasure lose its central focus. It's the means without which we would never even recognize happiness and blessedness as desirable in the first place.