

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 4, 2021 at 1:39 PM

I'd be interested in any getting any feedback regarding this list:

An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

- 1) Do not pursue reckless or extravagant luxuries, but enjoy the occasional luxury should it happen to come your way.
- 2) Take action to eliminate bodily and mental pains, and enjoy the pleasure, tranquility, and peace of mind that comes as you eliminate hunger, thirst, fear, anxiety, stress, and boredom.
- 3) Study philosophy which leads to tranquility and peace of mind.
- 4) Cultivate and enjoy friendships with like-minded people.
- 5) Savor the sweetness of life as you pursue the fulfillment of life's natural desires, while neither causing harm to yourself or nor others.
- 6) Realize that at a certain point enjoyment comes to it's totality, and any additional pleasure is like "icing on a cake".

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2021 at 3:22 PM

My comment would be that all of those are largely correct, but that taken together they tend toward conveying a premise of under-shooting the goal of maximizing pleasure.

Once you realize that "pleasure" is not limited to any certain type of pleasure (and I think the texts are very clear in that regard) I think it becomes clear that the point is not to focus on some pre-existing category of pleasure (such as luxurious or simple) but to look for what *you* in your own personal experience value the most, and which can be attained without a level of pain you find not worth it.

In other words, while the goal is maximum pleasure / minimum pain, there's no absolute standard for either one, and you most certainly should not focus on "zero pain" as the overriding goal.

It's clear from the texts that we have to expect pain in life, and that we can manage it because intense pain is short, and minor pains, even if long, are readily endurable. Endurable for what purpose? For the sake of pleasure! And with the realization that since we have only a short time to live, any pleasure we will ever experience in eternity has to come when we are alive.

So I would argue that it is a huge mistake to focus on "minimum pain" as the goal - as many people argue Epicurus taught. I think of it this way:

Any realistic life scenario is going to contain a mixture of pleasurable times and painful times. The goal should be, little by little, (or as fast as you can, whichever is possible) to one by one remove the painful times and replace them with pleasurable times.

One illustration is the jelly bean jar that starts off half full of jelly beans (pleasure) and half full of air (pain). One by one you can add jelly beans (pleasures) to the jar, and gradually reduce the air (pain) in the jar.

But the point of the illustration is this: Once you get the jar nearly filled with jelly beans, and you have only one bean's quantity of air (pain) left, what do you have when you replace that last space with a jellybean?

Yes, you have total absence of pain, which is the goal. But the **reason** you now have total absence of pain is that you have filled the jar with jelly beans, and the presence of those jelly beans is what amounts to the life of total pleasure /absence of pain.

The implication of the ascetic viewpoint is that by replacing that last empty space with the final jelly bean, you somehow magically transform the jar of jelly beans into something totally different -- something that they now label "absence of pain" but for which they ignore the jar full of jelly beans that produced it!

Likewise, there is no way to ever produce a jar full of jelly beans (the life full of pleasure) by simply removing jelly beans, because there is no magic jelly beans that when totally removed constitute a life full of pleasure.

And equally to the point, there is no master list of "worthy" jelly beans that you must go looking for to put in the jar that are cosmically better than others. If you put only a few jelly beans in your jar and stop there, you end up with a jar full mostly with air (pain).

Now in the end everyone has free will to decide how to stock their own jelly bean jar. And if they decide that one or two jelly beans in the bottom of the jar is the best they can do (and that may in fact sometimes happen) then that is up to them. Their decision to stop filling the jar of jelly beans may be the best they can do, and they can take satisfaction in those jelly beans and treasure them. But if they stop short with only a few jelly beans when it was readily in their power to gather more, and the cost of those additional jelly beans would have been manageable for them (they judged the pain to be worth the effort) then I am afraid that we have a tragic picture where a lot of that air/pain will come from "regret" -- that they could have

had more pleasure, but simply chose not to pursue it. That's a tragic decision if it could have been otherwise, but if it's a result of outside forces that misled them, or then that's a time for philosophical campaign against those who did the misleading! 😊

But when the option is there for the person to do so, why would a person ever stop filling his or her jar with jelly beans, so long as it is in their capacity to fill the jar as much as possible, at a cost in pain they find acceptable?

I believe Epicurus taught that that is the best way to express the goal of life: As "Torquatus" said: "*Let us imagine a man living in **the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind**, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?. [The Reid version is more literal: "*

*Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures **great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily**, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable?"*]

Or as Cicero himself said in a particularly pithy variation: "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that ... that *nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.*"

Post by "Godfrey" of October 4, 2021 at 4:34 PM

I would add that an Epicurean understanding of pleasure is tied to an understanding of desires. Desires are not pleasures, and desires are integral to the conditions of one's life.

Epicurus famously breaks desires into natural/necessary, natural/unnecessary, and unnatural thus unnecessary. Whether something is natural, necessary, etc is to some degree determined by the amount of pleasure and/or pain it will cause to a specific individual. And this varies based on specifics such as the person's age, financial situation, health, culture, living situation, friends and so on.

As to your list [Kalosyni](#) I have a few comments (my numbers match yours):

1) This is a great example of the relativity of pleasures. A personal example that comes to mind is from a couple of years ago, when I was planning a garage remodel. It was "necessary" in order to carry out structural repairs, but of course there were lots of things that I thought about

adding that weren't strictly necessary to solve the basic problem. So I evaluated them in terms of how much pleasure they would bring vs how much pain they would cause in terms of money, time, disruption, etc. I added some things and decided not to add others, and it turned out that the final project has solved the necessary problems but also brings me much joy beyond the utilitarian aspect of having a structurally sound garage. It's not as swanky as it might have been but it brings me lots of pleasure.

So this is how I approached this particular issue on a personal level. Another person might consider it a waste of time and money to do any work on the garage at all: perhaps they don't have the money, maybe they don't expect to live much longer, maybe they're about to move to another state. Yet another person, perhaps homeless, might be happy to live in the garage, repairs or not. And so on....

2) I think this is important, but to me it illustrates to some degree just how natural Epicurus' philosophy is. Because this is something that I think we're all drawn to do, at least on some level. If I have a pain, I try to eliminate it, whether it's chronic disease or acute hunger. You might even say that the faculty of pleasure/pain is to some degree a reflex! To me what is more important is to be as aware as possible of what pains me and what brings me pleasure and why I do the things I do. Examine the sensations and my "preconceptions" about the discomfort and use this information to follow the guide of pleasure and pain.

3) At a minimum, I would add a comma after philosophy: "Study philosophy, which leads to tranquility and peace of mind." Studying philosophy is important but it can bring up difficult truths. Eventually these bring peace of mind, at least in my experience. Maybe I would re-word this item as "enjoy the pleasure of the study of philosophy".

4) 

5) I would say "savor the sweetness of life as you follow the Canon".

6) This I think is more of a philosophical argument; personally I don't think about a totality of pleasure or of additional pleasures, just pleasure. I'd probably eliminate this item and end with 5).

Post by "Kalosyni" of October 4, 2021 at 9:55 PM

Thank you [Cassius](#) and @Godfrey...It's going to take me some time to "unpack" and digest your replies.



Post by “Don” of October 4, 2021 at 11:05 PM

I'm late to the game (mea culpa!), but here are my thoughts as a slight edit. Overall, I think you're definitely on the right track. Thanks for putting the list together!

1) Do not chase desires that can never be fully satisfied.*

1a) Enjoy the occasional luxury when it comes your way.

2) Flee** from bodily and mental pains unless greater pleasure may be the result.

3) Take pleasure in the study of philosophy which leads to tranquility and peace of mind.***
(with a nod to [Godfrey](#))

4) Cultivate and enjoy friendships with like-minded people.

5) Savor the sweetness of life.

5a) Neither cause harm to yourself nor to others.

6) Realize that at a certain point enjoyment comes to it's totality, and any additional pleasure is like "icing on a cake". (I like the idea you're getting at here and it's an important one... just wondering about the wording. I actually like the "icing on the cake" metaphor.)

*1: I'm trying to get across the pursuit of limitless wealth or limitless power. Those cannot be filled and usually defined as "empty" in the original texts. But the way I've worded it could be misconstrued.

**2: I was going to say "avoid" but I don't like that, as in the conventional wording of "choice and avoidance". The original Greek has the connotation of "fleeing"... Choice and flight. Always struck me as much more active.

***3. The idea of tranquility and peace of mind still appeals to me. I find it easier to appreciate pleasures with a tranquil mind, and, from my readings of the text, Epicurus backs this up. I recognize that tranquility isn't the goal, pleasure is. But tranquility/peace of mind makes appreciating pleasure much easier from my perspective.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 5, 2021 at 1:18 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

***3. The idea of tranquility and peace of mind still appeals to me. I find it easier to appreciate pleasures with a tranquil mind, and, from my readings of the text, Epicurus backs this up. I recognize that tranquility isn't the goal, pleasure is. But tranquility/peace of mind makes appreciating pleasure much easier from my perspective.

I agree with this: well stated!

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 5, 2021 at 12:34 PM

There are many interesting points made here by [Cassius](#), [Godfrey](#), [Don](#).

It seems to me that you can look at pleasure and pain as either additive or subtractive. So the subtractive way to look at pleasure, is that pain has been removed, and in its place we now have pleasure. And since Epicurus says there is no neutral state of feelings, then that would mean that (for example) the pleasure of fun and entertainments has removed the pain of boredom.

It is more appealing to me to see pleasure as additive, and that is probably a heuristic. However, if one is to maximize enjoyment, then it is good to remove mental pains of anxiety and stress.

I'll need to ponder the jelly bean jar analogy a bit more to see if it works for me, or come up with something that can also accommodate the two types of pleasures - pleasures that last only a short time and pleasures that last much longer.

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2021 at 1:20 PM

1 - yes please let us know if you come up with variations/improvements of the jelly bean jar analogy. I am sure there are much better ones!

2

[Quote from Philia](#)

It is more appealing to me to see pleasure as additive, and that is probably a heuristic.

Absolutely I agree with that, and I think most people at first glance see it that way too. That's "instinctively" the right approach, IMO. In fact I fluctuate on how much I really accept the opposite view myself. In my (admittedly small) mind, the only reason that the "subtractive" model "works" mentally is because you know that there are only two categories of feelings in the Epicurean model - pleasure and pain. I think instinctively that people suspect there is a "neutral" state in which you're feeling neither one.

I can reconcile that in two ways:

(1) There is pleasure simply in being alive (if you allow yourself to recognize it) and most all people can at least take pleasure in good memories, regardless of their current circumstances. I think that's a valid observation and I don't discount its importance. However:

(2) You can view the issue as a "truism" that flows logically from having defined pleasure and pain as the only two feelings, because then all feelings are either one or the other. I see that as a more "intellectual" approach, however, which is more suited to philosophical debate than it is to immediate analysis for someone in a bad situation. But here too I see that as a valid approach and particularly important in debating the arguments against pleasure put forth by Plato in [Philebus](#). The formula is in my mind what creates, and is the only justification for, the "absence of pain is the highest pleasure" formula. Feeling that you are totally without pain then means, by definition, that you are full of pleasure(s). But to me that is "measuring pleasure by reason" - a kind of formula has to be grasped "by those capable of figuring the problem out." I see that as an issue of measuring pleasure by reason, such as [PD19](#). "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, *if one measures, by reason*, the limits of pleasure."

Also [PD20](#). The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. *But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good* of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life.

OK [Don](#), Philia's question has been very helpful to me here. In the future (if I can remember!) I am going to refer to the (for me) emotionally unsatisfying phrase "absence of pain = the greatest pleasure" as "**measuring pleasure by reason**" and "**a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good.**" 😊 That will probably help highlight the perspective from which that formulation makes the most sense. What do you think of that?

(In fact I am going to bookmark Philia's "It is more appealing to me to see pleasure as additive" as the trigger for me seeing the "measuring pleasure by reason" formula, and a linkage to [PD19](#) and [PD20](#), that I should be embarrassed not to have seen as a boy! 😊

Post by “Marco” of October 6, 2021 at 1:11 AM

Are there two types of pleasure? How important is time when having pleasure? Is time important?

...

‘pleasures that last only a short time and pleasures that last much longer.’

Post by “Godfrey” of October 6, 2021 at 2:14 AM

That's a juicy question [Marco](#) !

There has been a controversy over the centuries over just that, and the terminology is "katastematic" v "kinetic" pleasure. Katastematic is considered "stable" pleasure and kinetic is considered "active" pleasure. There's a ton of technical debate over whether there are actually two types at all and whether one is a "higher" pleasure or whether pleasure is pleasure, period.

Here's a place on the forum to explore the subject:

[Kinetic and Katastematic Pleasure](#)

The "go to" paper on the subject is [Nikolsky](#)'s article in the forum filebase: [Nikolsky - Epicurus On Pleasure](#)

As I recall, I got a lot out of reading Wenham's paper which is shorter and maybe a good preparation for reading [Nikolsky](#). I can't find Wenham's paper in the filebase, so I've attached it below.

Having said all that, I see that your question also touches on "duration", which is often combined with "intensity" in describing pleasure. I think this terminology is more practical, where the katastematic/kinetic debate might be considered more philosophical. "Practical" as in choosing between pleasures of varying durations and intensities in a given situation, with the knowledge that a given pleasure is not universally better than any other pleasure.

Post by “Marco” of October 6, 2021 at 3:05 AM

Godfrey, thanks, yes I know about katastematic v kinetic. But i’m struggling with ‘time’ and ‘pleasure’, like in PD 19.

Post by “Don” of October 6, 2021 at 6:08 AM

I've come around to thinking some of the PDs should simply be read together and not in isolation. The original text didn't split them up. It was one continuous text. My suggestion is to read 18-21 as one continuous text. It seems to provide a much better context.

Post by “Don” of October 6, 2021 at 6:34 AM

Consider how this sounds when taken as a whole:

As soon as the pain produced by the lack of something is removed, pleasure in the flesh is not increased but only embellished. Yet the limit of enjoyment in the mind is produced by reasoning out these very things and similar things, which once provoked the greatest fears in the mind. Infinite time and finite time contain the same amount of joy, if its limits are measured out through reasoning. The flesh assumes that the limits of joy are infinite, and that infinite joy can be produced only through infinite time. But the mind, reasoning out the goal and limits of the flesh and dissolving fears about eternity, produces a complete way of life and therefore has no need of infinite time; yet the mind does not flee from joy, nor when events cause it to exit from life does it look back as if it has missed any aspect of the best life. One who perceives the limits of life knows how easy it is to expel the pain produced by a lack of something and to make one’s entire life complete; so that there is no need for the things that are achieved through struggle.

Post by “Martin” of October 6, 2021 at 6:35 AM

Intensity of pleasure is usually limited in time by control loops in our body (e.g. lack of ability to get aroused after an orgasm, getting used to the particular pleasure, exhaustion, overstimulation) or by the nature of the activity.

In general, I attempt to feel the easy to get pleasure of low intensity for most of the time and intense pleasure only occasionally. If intense pleasure comes as a surprise without having expected it and without the typically painful preparation for it, I of course try to enjoy the experience as much as possible.

As pleasure depends heavily on the individual, here are some practical examples:

One of the greatest pleasures I have experienced so far is flying along ziplines high up through spectacular scenery. A flight along one zipline usually takes much less than a minute, so the intense pleasure is naturally limited to a very short time. (I wish there were 10 km long ziplines). In terms of pain, zipline flying requires long travel to go to the respective place, it is expensive, the effort might be in vain because the operator might block me from the ziplines because of high blood pressure or bad weather, and pain in the form of anxiety of height might kill the pleasure. The risk of injury and death seems to be so low that it does not show up in my hedonic calculus but for others that might be relevant.

The listed pains (in particular the waste of time for travel and the risks of travel) make me pursue the desire for zipline flights only rarely. However, the expectation of the intense pleasure makes me plan for more zipline flights in the future. So far, I have 2 new places on my bucket list, may add more as I find them near where I travel anyway and might go again to places where I have been already if other reasons for travel get me near them.

I took the opportunity of floating in a vertical wind canal when business travel brought me in walking distance to one. It was a pleasure but not as great as I expected, apparently because it requires skill and experience. I expect the pleasure to increase greatly after gaining the skill and experience. In case there is a wind tunnel near a place where I happen to stay for an extended period and cost of access is moderate, I would probably do this often because of the expectation of great pleasure although the duration of the pleasure is always short by the nature of the activity.

I never did skydiving with a parachute from a plane. I am not sure whether I would pursue an easy opportunity for skydiving. The reported pleasure of free fall is attractive but the pain in terms of fear of flight on a plane and possibly intense fear of heights is a deterrent.

I would probably not pursue an opportunity for a zero gravity flight or a space flight because the result of the hedonic calculus is negative for me.

Another one of the greatest pleasures I have experienced so far is falling asleep together with my wife (ex-wife since recently, sigh) while hugging each other. It is limited in time in 2 different ways:

If I actually fall asleep within minutes, the onset of deep sleep terminates the conscious and memorable experience of the pleasure.

If I stay fully awake for several minutes with no indication of falling asleep soon, boredom kicks in, and the increasing desire to do something converts the experience from pleasure to pain.

Another great pleasure was indulging in chocolate mousse. Many years ago, a chain restaurant provided it in a big bowl as part of its buffet. It was the main motivation for me to eat at that restaurant. By going repeatedly to the bowl and filling a small plate with a moderate amount, I ended up with a meal with more than 50% chocolate mousse by volume, and as it was a buffet meal, the whole meal meant gross overeating way beyond feeling no more hungry and stopping just short of discomfort. At that time, I ignored the risk of accelerated onset of diabetes from excessive intake of sugar.

Then, the restaurant changed to provide the chocolate mousse only in small cups. I felt too embarrassed to take many of these cups, so I ended up eating much less chocolate mousse, at most 3 cups.

Eventually, I wanted to reduce the risk of diabetes by excluding most foods with substantial amounts of sugar. I gradually reduced the number of cups to just one and got accustomed to the shortened duration of the intense pleasure of eating chocolate mousse and to appreciate the less intense pleasure of eating other food. I changed my habit further from choosing the cup which was filled with the most amount of mousse to the one which had the least.

After a while of strongly reduced sugar intake, I lost the craving for chocolate mousse and stopped eating it at that chain restaurant, to which I still go once a week when I stay near one.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2021 at 6:46 AM

Great answers. Only I can think of to add is to ask Marco:. Did you have something else in mind when you asked if there are two types of pleasure? Or was your entire question focused on time (long and short)?

Post by “Marco” of October 6, 2021 at 7:11 AM

Cassius, I speak Dutch, so this is a google translation. No, no further explanation is needed. I found that division into short and long pleasure strange because it doesn't match RS 19.

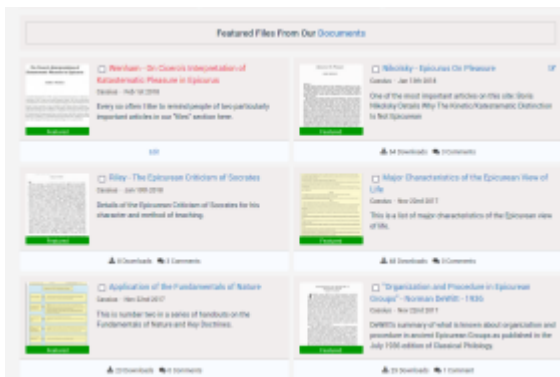
My personal experience is that if, for example, I paint intensely (I'm sitting alone in a forest somewhere and have no pain or hunger, my cellphone is off, my material is fine and I am not disturbed by noise or passers-by) time falls away. Suddenly I'm two or three hours away, without realizing time. In pleasure there is no time, only flow. I've always associated that feeling of timelessness with RS 19.

But beware, when I think at a moment: 'what am I doing timeless painting', time also comes back. Well-being must not be polluted in any way. Every pollution pulls me back in time.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2021 at 9:07 AM

Just a note to Godfrey - sorry you couldn't find that Wenham article. The forum software has lots of powerful features that I don't really know how to use. But I note the search function doesn't always cover every section of the software - maybe that happened here.

In this case I have tried to highlight the [nikolsky](#) and wenham and some other core texts by marking them as "featured" which makes them show up on the home page (if you scroll down far enough) as so:



The other article on the K/K issue that sticks out as supporting the same conclusion is the chapter from Gosling and Taylor, which is here: [Gosling & Taylor - On Katastematic and Kinetic Pleasure](#)

[Nikolsky](#) tells us that is what spurred him to write his article.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 6, 2021 at 2:18 PM

After reading the above posts, some ideas come up:

It seems that one could do a hedonic calculus when making choices, but if the underlying assumption is that short-term physical pleasures are equally as important as long-term mental pleasures, then the long-term results will be a mixed bag (pleasure mixed with pain or pleasure resulting in pain), and/or one will find oneself on a never-ending hedonic treadmill.

So an Epicurean philosophy of life would be a life of guaranteed continuous pleasures ---- of a medium intensity (a nice well built fire to warm oneself together with one's friends) vs. a high intensity (too much fuel on the fire burns out too quickly). And this would be the difference between the Epicureans and the Cyrenaics.

PD 27 - Of all things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2021 at 3:34 PM

[Quote from Philia](#)

but if the underlying assumption is that short-term physical pleasures are equally as important as long-term mental pleasures

Yes that is the tricky part and I do not think that Epicurus would say that that can be presumed. Most generally, I think he would say that that decision has to be made individually by each person and according to life circumstances, and that it will prove to be applicable to some people but not to others (so therefore not a "general" rule). Plus, to be clear, I am not limiting the circumstances to "material well-being." People rank their pleasures in radically different ways, and two children born in the same house to a life of luxury, or to a life of poverty, could easily reach different conclusions on how they choose to spend their time to generate the most pleasure for themselves.

But I think it's pretty clear that Epicurus did not reach such a conclusion in his own case (he devoted his life to philosophical study and indeed controversy).

So the very first piece of evidence in unraveling Epicurean doctrine (how Epicurus lived his own life) would not be consistent with applying that premise across-the-board to everyone.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 6, 2021 at 4:42 PM

Let me restate my idea:

If one assumes that short-term pleasures provide the same benefits as long-term pleasures, then one will, at times, make choices that result in less pleasure and more pain.

I vividly imagine Epicurus would welcome Cyreniacs into his Garden, because they could test out his wisdom and find personal benefit.

And yes, we each must do our own choosing, and we will each experience the results of our choices. Sometimes one makes choice and then sees that something different could be done the next time. So there is testing, observing, and learning.

I sense that my readings and interpretations might be moving me in a direction that do not fully resonate for some. I would wonder why, but may never have an answer.

I begin to feel...

...as a frog kissed by a princess, but instead of an Epicurean, I've turned into a skeptic.

Post by “Don” of October 6, 2021 at 5:07 PM

Personally, I think you're onto something with the short- vs long-term pleasure. Cassius may disagree. I've interpreted the Cyrenaic position to be "*always* pleasure in the moment" grab it *now*. Whereas Epicurus's philosophy was to make choices that would provide sustainable pleasure and the prospect that it would persist.

I wouldn't take on that skeptic label just yet 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2021 at 5:46 PM

[Quote from Philia](#)

If one assumes that short-term pleasures provide the same benefits as long-term pleasures,

Yes you "could" assume that, but why would you? By definition the short-term pleasure is different from the long-term pleasure in terms of time, so they are not identical.

Please don't sense that I am disagreeing, I am simply at this point trying to understand your reasoning.

Epicurus may have said that "[PD19](#). Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure." but that is by no means the same as saying that time is an irrelevant factor. Epicurus strongly discourages suicide, and it seems clear (to me at least) that Epicurus is saying that life is desirable, so we should continue to desire to live so long as we can gain more pleasure than pain from living on. The issue I think we are discussing is what does "more" mean, because I would argue that "more" does not equate to "length of time" at all. There are many other issues, intensity being only one, and variations in types of pleasures that only the individual can just to be "worth" the pain required to attain it.

But let's stay with that passage I quoted above. I don't think Don would assume that "short-term benefits provide the SAME benefits as long-term pleasure" either, correct [Don](#)? So I am not sure where you are thinking the assumption you are naming should come from.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 5:49 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I've interpreted the Cyrenaic position to be "always pleasure in the moment" grab it now. Whereas Epicurus's philosophy was to make choices that would provide sustainable pleasure and the prospect that it would persist.

I agree (at least largely) with that statement of the Cyreniac position, but I don't think I would say the second sentence is accurate. Yes clearly "sustainability" (meaning the time element) is a factor to consider, but there's definitely no way to say flatly across the board that time is ALWAYS the deciding factor or even the MOST IMPORTANT factor. That's clear from the letter to Menoeceus:

"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to **enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.**"

So how does one rank the "most pleasant"? I think the first and most important aspect of the answer to that is that there's no universal single answer. The "most pleasant" by nature (by the Epicurean physics and understanding of the cosmos) is up to the individual given his or her own tastes and circumstances and preferences. Certainly I would think most people are going to consider the time element, but what about the person who wants to say "damn the torpedoes full speed ahead" and wants to climb to the top of a mountain to be there to see for a moment, even if he knows he'll never make it back down. Can such a person be said to be "wrong"? By what standard? I think Epicurus would say that that's between you and Nature to decide, with you making the call under all your individual circumstances.

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2021 at 5:54 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."

Exactly. I interpret that "the most pleasant" with the idea of pleasure **over a period of time.** The **length** of time is not the focus; it's the **persistence** of pleasure over the time in question.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 5:56 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I interpret that "the most pleasant" with the idea of pleasure **over a period of time.** The **length** of time is not the focus; it's the **persistence** of pleasure over the time in question.

Oh my! 😊

😊 I don't for a moment dispute your right and proper position in interpreting it that way for yourself. I agree that Epicurus would want you to do that if you believe it best for you! But I would not calculate it that way myself, and I suspect we would have a strong division of opinion on that if we took a poll. I would consider "intensity" or other "qualities" as at least as important as duration in time (persistence).

While "truth" is not decided by polling, and it doesn't matter how many here agree or disagree, I would like for some of our core people to weigh in on this because theirs are the opinions I respect, and I think we could all learn a lot by discussing this. 😊

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2021 at 7:00 PM

LOL! Well, well, we've finally found something we disagree about. 😊

How would you interpret "the most pleasant"?

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2021 at 7:06 PM

Here's my literal translation of the section of Menoikeus:

Quote

Just as, on the one hand, the most food is not chosen but that which brings the greatest pleasure; as well as, on the other hand, not the longest time but that in which one enjoys the fruits of that which brings the greatest pleasure.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 6, 2021 at 7:16 PM

[Quote from Philia](#)

It seems that one could do a hedonic calculus when making choices, but if the underlying assumption is that short-term physical pleasures are equally as important as long-term mental pleasures, then the long-term results will be a mixed bag (pleasure mixed with pain or pleasure resulting in pain), and/or one will find oneself on a never-ending hedonic treadmill.

So an Epicurean philosophy of life would be a life of guaranteed continuous pleasures ---- of a medium intensity (a nice well built fire to warm oneself together with one's friends) vs. a high intensity (too much fuel on the fire burns out too quickly). And this would be the difference between the Epicureans and the Cyrenaics.

I'm not sure that it's correct to have an underlying assumption that short-term physical pleasures are equally as important as long-term mental pleasures. To put words into Epicurus' mouth, I think that he would say that the most important thing is a correct understanding of his philosophy and that this would provide the pleasure of freedom from fear. Having achieved that, one can vary, embellish, and add icing to the cake through various other pleasures, both short- and long-term and of varying intensities.

Further, if the hedonic calculus is indeed subjective then the underlying assumption is different for each person: some preferring short-term physical pleasures and some preferring long-term mental pleasures, and of varying intensities. And preference would be different in time as well, varying over the course of an individual's life.

So I don't come to the conclusion that an Epicurean philosophy of life leads to continuous medium intensity pleasures, although the fire and friends example is quite pleasant! That conclusion, to me, is more like population based medicine which ignores the individual and averages out the entire population.

As to the Cyrenaics, I can't recall their overall philosophy at the moment, but I would consider that in comparing them with Epicurus (or anyone else). Epicurus has a very coherent overall philosophy, of which pleasure is a part, and the way that I understand that philosophy brings me great pleasure as being a fairly accurate representation of "the way things are". If the Cyrenaic philosophy as a whole made more sense to me then I would consider applying that to my life.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

How would you interpret "the most pleasant"?

First, I am going to attempt at least for a while not to "like" too many posts here in this thread, as sometimes the "likes" tend to mean taking sides when "sides" is a bad thing to do. Who knows whether any of us at this point have the "right" interpretation? (We can come back to likes later, though, cause they do help with things over time, for those who are "persistent" in following arguments.) 😊

I guess further I need to be sure what we mean by "right" interpretation, which I'll define for my use as "what Epicurus intended" (not necessarily what I myself might think.)

Second, I think that my starting point as above is that in the Epicurean universe there can be no single definition of the right answer here. This is why I try to emphasize "pleasure as a feeling" and that's the big implication of it being a feeling -- feelings are largely subjective and at least highly difficult (and probably impossible) to quantify in any objectively-measurable terms. "Time" is a pretty easy measure, and I personally think "intensity" is another good term, and I think I recall in some of the recent psychology material that you (Don) and Godfrey have posted another term ("affect"?). But even more than that I think that there are probably lots of other aspects that can be described and I don't think we can or should try to pin down pleasure to a limited set of categories.

That's also what I mean much of the time when I set off Pleasure or Feeling against the Platonic Ideals or the Religious "revelation" -- I see "pleasure" as a sweeping term that includes all "positive" feelings/sensations from any sense or mental activity, and in that status as "the positive feeling," I think the big philosophical war is between Idealism v. Divine Revelation vs Feeling (or Pleasure). (I am considering Idealism as essentially non-theistic in that list, even though I know Plato's version was essentially theistic if you drill down far enough - that's why idealism and revelation get along so well to fight Epicurus.)

So with all that as background I interpret "most pleasant" as a feeling that we generate (or receive) within ourselves as the most valuable to us "in total." I do think that it is reasonable to look at time (duration and persistence) as an important element, but equally or more important is "intensity" (maybe "depth" is a better word?). For example that is why I think Epicurus said that it is at times appropriate to die for a friend. The depth of pain that you would suffer from knowing that a friend died who you could have saved could be (or I could see it being) so deep and intense that no amount of time would be sufficient to make like worth living after that, so you go ahead and sacrifice your life as the proper hedonic calculus of how to proceed in such an awful situation.

I know I keep talking about pleasure being subjective and up to the individual to evaluate, and I think that's an unsatisfying way of expressing it because it's an attempt to address the problem through "logic" and "definitions."

Probably the better approach would be to point to particular feelings of love and affection you have, such as for a spouse or a child (or whatever) that we all can identify with. Then you can point and say those are examples which allow us to understand the feelings involved so that we can unwind the question. All of us are probably familiar with the examples of how lovers talk about if they only had "one more day" with their departed love one they would sacrifice everything, or one more day to spend with a departed parent or child. I think those are examples of deep and intense emotion and are probably the hard cases that help establish the point.

Some pleasures are so intense and so deep and so important to us that no lesser pleasures, no matter the duration or persistence, can stack up to them in our own estimation, and if asked to choose between them we would unhesitatingly choose the deep/intense over the longer more persistent duration.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2021 at 8:38 PM

Also: The issues we are discussing now also relate back to the "Net Pleasure Maximization Worksheet" that I put together a couple of years ago. I don't think Don was around then but maybe if he had been I would have taken it further, but I received a lot of argument "against" it on just these grounds: that pleasure can't be quantified scientifically by time or intensity or anything else.

I still think that going through the exercise of thinking about categories can be helpful, and I think that what Don and others are saying right now about "persistence" is an example of thinking about one such category. But in the end, the categories are like all "forms" -- they fall short in capturing the fullness of the experience of the feelings involved. Even all the annotations at the bottom weren't sufficient caveats to translate the full effect into reality:

Post

[A Draft Epicurean Pleasure Maximization Worksheet](#)

Feelings cannot be reduced to numbers, and there are important limitations in the use of a "worksheet" as an aid in evaluating choices and avoidances. However it may be helpful to some people to visualize an illustration of the weighing process that some term the "hedonic calculus." Here is a draft example for your consideration and comment. Scores included here

are of course fictional and for example only. A version of the spreadsheet in xlsx format is attached for downloading.



Cassius

July 11, 2019 at 10:25 PM

I have to include a picture because I thought it was neat looking 😊

Epicurean Net Pleasure Maximization Worksheet

"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."

Life Activity	Feelings Of Pleasure (+)					Net Score	Feelings of Pain (-)					Notes
	Intensity / Extent of Pleasure	Current Bodily Pleasure	Future Mental Pleasure	Future Bodily Pleasure	Total Pleasure Score		Total Pain Score	Intensity / Extent of Pain	Current Bodily Pain	Future Mental Pain	Future Bodily Pain	
Sleep		6		4	10	10	0					
Go to Work			4	4	12	7	-5			-2	-3	
Have Lunch with Friends	6	5	7	2	20	20	0					
Go to Gym	4		1	1	11	3	-8	-4	-4			
Go to Museum	5		5	5	15	15	0					
Read Lucretius	8		8	8	24	23	-1	-1				
Read Plato					0	-21	-21	-7		-7	-7	
Choose Activities To Maximize The Pleasure Score ... >>						92	57	-35	<< ... At A Cost In Pain You Find To Be Acceptable			

Scoring Considerations:

- (1) Feelings cannot be captured in numerical terms. All scoring is relative. Nature provides no absolute standards and no authority higher than your own feelings.
- (2) The goal of life is to maximize under your personal circumstances the net pleasure score in the gold box.
- (3) The theoretical scoring limit is that which can be attained when a person's experience is completely filled with pleasures with no mixture of pain. This theoretical limit is not attainable for indefinite periods by human beings, but is considered "god-like" and serves as the goal toward which to strive.
- (4) Maximizing net pleasure is achieved by choosing activities which maximize pleasure at a cost in pain that you deem acceptable.
- (5) All pleasures are pleasing, but some pleasures exact a greater cost in pain than do others.
- (6) Sometimes we choose pain when a choice that is painful in the present brings us greater net pleasure or lesser net pain.
- (7) In predicting the cost in pain of any activity, remember that pleasures neither natural nor necessary will frequently (but not always) exact the greatest cost in pain; pleasures which are both natural and necessary will generally (but not always) exact the least cost in pain.
- (8) Remember to consider how your choices produce pain or pleasure in your friends, because this impacts your own scoring.
- (9) A net score of zero does not indicate that there are "neutral" states of feeling. Activities may produce both pleasurable and painful results, but feelings, like oil and water, do not mix to produce a third category beyond pleasure and pain.

Note: Ok after checking back in the thread I do not see that Don participated so I am not sure if Don was here for this or not. In fact I don't see much discussion in the thread. I think the "debate" against it that I recall took place in non-public channels.

Note 2: Looks like Don was not here, but Godfrey probably was, although mostly in "lurk" mode



Maybe if Don had been here we would all be spreadsheeting now!



Note 3: The problem is those numbers may be useful for ballparking feelings at the current moment, but there's no reliable way to really come up with them other than pulling them "out of the air." So in the end the totals are largely meaningless. The exercise itself might be a useful way to "get in touch with your feelings" and to rank different choices against each other, but that's probably about it.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 6, 2021 at 9:06 PM

I remember the discussion, but I don't remember the pleasing graphic quality of the final product. Very nice!

Post by "Don" of October 6, 2021 at 11:47 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I interpret that "the most pleasant" with the idea of pleasure **over a period of time.** The **length** of time is not the focus; it's the **persistence** of pleasure over the time in question.

First, I should slightly amend that statement. I'll add:

Quote from Don, revised

I interpret that phrase "the most pleasant" with as the idea of pleasures maintained **over a period of time.** The **length** of time is not the focus; it's the **persistence** of pleasure writ large over the time in question.

That's why Epicurus can say "[We choose] not the longest time but that in which one enjoys the fruits of that which brings the greatest pleasure."

This coincides with Fragment 116:

Quote from Plutarch, citing Epicurus

116. I summon you to sustained enjoyment and not to empty and trifling virtues, which destroy your confidence in the fruits of what you have. Plut. Adv. Col. 17

There's some disagreement on how that last phrase should be translated evidently, but, for my purposes here the first part is the important one. "Sustained enjoyment" in this translation is ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς hedonas sunekheis, literally, "continuous/continual/unremitting pleasures" That "continuous/continual" is where I'm getting Epicurus's summons to us to have been to experience continuous pleasure throughout our life. To make choices to make sure pleasures "persist" throughout our life, no matter the length of that life.

I'm also drawing on my recent "re-discovery" of Cicero thanks to you when "Torquatus" says:

Quote from Cicero, De Finibus

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind...

or, as Reid, translates:

Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them ;

So, again, we make choices that will lead to a life of "continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures." Pleasure is maintained throughout one's life.

From my perspective, it is not the "time" involved in the *individual* pleasure that's most (or even) important. The important things are the choices we make to continue to experience pleasures great, numerous, and constant throughout our life.

Your spreadsheet and focus on time or intensity or depth gets away from the idea that the number of pleasures is "great" and "numerous." It doesn't matter, I don't think, how deep, intense, or prolonged any individual pleasure is. It's the idea that we should imbue our entire lives with "continuous enjoyment" of "numerous" pleasures.

Your friendship example strikes me as bolstering my point. If you fail to protect your friend, you will spend the rest of your life regretting their loss and your failure to come to their aid. The pain will "persist" throughout your life. However, if you lose your life doing something for the "pleasure" of your friendship, your "pleasure" is maintained throughout your life no matter if it is cut short. This also strikes me as a warning/exhortation to "pluck the day" *carpe diem* when it is available. There is no guarantee of tomorrow.

You're right. Don wasn't around for the spreadsheet discussion. I joined in Feb 2020. The spreadsheet and numbers remind me too much of [Bentham's hedons and dolors in his felicific](#)

[calculus](#) for my taste, a little too Utilitarian for me.

So, I will say, your visceral reaction to my response actually surprised me. I didn't see it as controversial at all. And I realize these responses here aren't going to convince you, but I feel concentrating on the trees of worrying about the intensity or depth or duration of an individual pleasure takes our attention away from the forest of pleasure to which Epicurus is calling us to experience.

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2021 at 6:15 AM

First of all, I do certainly agree that pleasures being continuous is an important aspect. We want pleasure to be as as maximized as possible throughout our lives, and we can attain that through the mind's understanding that pain is short if intense and manageable if long, and offset pain with recollection of good memories and in many other ways. The ideal, of course, would be to include no prospect of interruption by death, but that's only possible as far as we know to the gods (though we get very close through the understanding that unlimited time provides no "greater" pleasure than limited time). I would say "very close" rather than "the same" because the pleasure of a god differs in "time" from our own pleasure.

So continuity is a very important aspect of the goal, but what I am saying is that continuity / persistence alone cannot necessarily trump intensity / quality of pleasure. The "most pleasant" isn't measured only in how long it lasts, but in how much depth of pleasure experience. The pleasure I get from breathing is not a pleasure i would choose over the pleasure of saving my wife or child from a fire. If I remember to come back here I will add in that quote from Usener about "this is the meaning of the greatest good, if we think about it rather than go walking around endlessly debating it."

But the real point I want to add to this thread now is that there was a need for Epicurus to focus on continuity of pleasure for another reason: one again, to be able to prevail over Plato's arguments that pleasure cannot be the greatest good. Here again I am following DeWitt's analysis which i think is sound (this section continues further, but this first part is the heart of it):

THE NATURAL CEILINGS OF PLEASURE

Having established body and soul upon a parity, equal partners in life, Epicurus next proceeded to propound a number of paradoxes: first, that limits of pleasure were set by Nature, beyond which no increase was possible; second, that pleasure was one and not many; and third, that **continuous** pleasure was possible. These new doctrines were the offspring of controversy, because the contrary doctrines had been sponsored by Plato and his followers, who in this instance agreed for the most part with the multitude.

The first paradox is part of Authorized Doctrine 3, and by this position its prime importance is revealed: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures." The meaning is plain if the pleasure of eating be taken as an example. Nature is the teacher, as usual, and sets the norm. Hunger is a desire of the first category according to Epicurus: it is both natural and necessary. Where this natural and necessary desire for food exists, the pleasure of satisfying it cannot

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PLEASURE CAN BE CONTINUOUS

The apex of the new structure of ethics erected by Epicurus consisted in the teaching that pleasure can be continuous. The discovery of a logical basis for this proposition was essential for the promulgation of hedonism as a practical code of conduct for mankind. No philosophy that offered merely intermittent intervals of pleasure would have possessed any broad or urgent appeal for those in quest of the happy life.

The predecessors of Epicurus had spent considerable thought upon the analysis of pleasure, but their attitude was in the main merely analytical and academic, lacking relevance to action. Their real aim was for promoting the happiness of mankind. They were rather in the position of men who give themselves to the study of anatomy without contemplating the practice of medicine. The attitude of Epicurus, on the contrary, was pragmatic from the beginning. The declaration that "Vain is the word of that philosopher by which he mistook of analized is heinous" has already been quoted.¹¹

The desired logical basis for the continuity of pleasure was afforded by the discovery of natural ceilings of pleasure. From this is derived the division into basic and ornamental or superfluous pleasures, corresponding respectively to natural and necessary desires and those that are neither natural nor necessary. Hunger and thirst exemplify the

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former class while the desire for rich viands and rare wines belongs to the second class. Correspondingly, the satisfaction of normal hunger and thirst is a basic pleasure while the gratification of abnormal desires for rich foods and drinks is ornamental and superfluous.

This recognition of basic pleasures, in its turn, signified the recogni-

tion of a normal state of being, consisting of health of mind and of body and freedom from fears and all unnecessary desires, which was called *ataraxia* or *aponia*. This condition was discomforted, but allowance must be made for a certain variation. Hunger and thirst arouse and call for satisfaction, which is a moderately kinetic pleasure, whereupon the individual returns to the normal state of absence of pain. Epicurus describes in one of those reciprocal statements for which he had a preference: "Only then have we need of pleasure when from the absence of pleasure we feel pain, and when we do not feel pain we no longer feel need of pleasure."¹² While these words have reference to the natural desires of the body, the description of the normal state must be understood to include freedom from pain in the body and distress in the mind.

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 *gravis in-ter-*one this argument,¹³ 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.

Even at the present day the same objection is raised. For instance, a modern Platonist, ill informed on the true tenets of Epicurus, has this to say: "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by enjoining pleasure of all positive content?"¹⁴ This ignores the fact that this was but one of the definitions of pleasure offered by Epicurus, that he recognized kinetic as well as static pleasures. It ignores also the fac-

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his disciples to attend them and that regular banquets were a part of the ritual of the sect. Neither does it take account of the fact that in the judgment of Epicurus those who feel the least need of luxury enjoy it most and that intervals of abstinence enhance the enjoyment of luxury.³⁹ Thus the Platonist dispenses pain upon himself the necessity of denying that the moderation of the use of the year furnishes additional zest to the enjoyment of the Christmas dinner; he has failed to become aware of the Epicurean and far "vindicating pleasure."

On a level with this criticism is the allegation of a more recent writer that Epicurus put himself in a course by defining pleasure as freedom from pain.⁴⁰ It was not Epicurus who put himself in a course but rather Antipater and Plutarch, who by recognizing only pain as opposed to intervals either void of pleasure or neutral or mixed, rendered all continuity of pleasure impossible and consequently all continuity of happiness. The error of the modern critic is to allow ancient controversy to vitiate the independence of modern judgment. The ancient critics of Epicureanism were not concerned to present a neat estimate of its sociology; they pressed upon those decisions which, when considered singly, seemed susceptible of refutation or ridicule. They kept harping upon the negative description of pleasure as freedom from pain and ignored the positive aspect as health of mind and health of body. The latter, being difficult to attack, is lacking from the hostile assessments and survives only anonymously in the literary tradition.

It would have been strange if this doctrine of continuous happiness were absent from the Aristotelian Doctrine. Its presence is easily con-

cluded, because the content of the controversy has become blurred with the lapse of time, but the emphasis derived from prominence of position must have been at one time striking. It forms part of the famous *taurophagismus*, Doctrine 9. The first part, already quoted, identifies the basic pleasure as freedom from pain, the only kind that could be continuous: "The removal of all pain is the limit of magnitude for pleasures." This rules out the "neutral state" as postulated by Plutarch; it identifies the neutral state as one of static pleasure. The second part of the Doctrine dispenses of Plutarch's "mixed state": "And whenever the experience of pleasure is present, so long as it persists, there is no pain or distress or a combination of them." This amounts to denying that pain and pleasure are capable of mixing and of resulting in a state that is different from either. Epicurus implies instead and elsewhere

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repels that pain is subtractable from pleasure, leaving a balance of the latter.⁴¹ This principle applies either to physical pain or mental distress or to both together. It is essential to the thesis that continuous pleasure is possible.

Those who denied that pleasure was the telos were naturally not concerned with the question of the continuity of pleasure, but there was an analogous question of equal consequence, whether the wise man could be happy under all circumstances. The importance of this revealed itself shortly after Plutarch's denial and showed no abatement for three centuries. In two passages Cicero lists the names of those who gave an affirmative answer — from which the name of Plutarch is conspicuously absent — and elsewhere he proceeds to cite the opinion of Epicurus, misrepresenting him characterly and using his name as an excuse

for parading a tedious collection of his own translations from Greek tragedy on the topic of pain.⁴² What Epicurus is so accused as saying is this: "Even if under torture the wise man is happy."⁴³ Cicero chose to imagine him in the lower hell of the *Uranian Phalaris*, in which the victims were roasted alive, and as saying "How pleasant; how little this torture means to me!" This is a shabby inversion and shameful quibbling. It ignores the difference between roast, "pleasant" and heat, "happy."

Even Epicurus could not have used pleasure as an invariable synonym for happiness. He died a happy man but in physical agony. His last words, known even beyond his own age, exhibit the triumph of happiness over pain: "On this blessed day of my life, which is likewise my last, I write these words to you all. The pains of my strangury and dysentery do not abate the excess of their characteristic severity and continue to keep me company, but ever against all these I set the joy in my soul at the recollection of the dignifications conferred by you and the rest."⁴⁴ He is here summarizing the subtraction of pain from pleasure, leaving a balance of pleasure, which is happiness. The letter is addressed to *Fluencius* but is intended for the whole *Laurentine circle*, which made many contributions to the literature of the school. It is the grateful recognition of this service, together with all that it implies, that in this instance is declared to outweigh the physical pain.

It was the discovery of static pleasure, without which continuity of pleasure was impossible, that resulted in the division of pleasures into

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static and kinetic. There was no call for such a division until the static

But in the end i see no reason for concluding that "length of time over life" necessarily overrides all other considerations in deciding which pleasures to choose, and i see many reasons for taking the opposite position (that we choose what we deem to be the "most pleasant" - not which lasts the longest).

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 6:47 AM

There is another saying extant which is supplementary to the former: "Acute pains quickly result in death; protracted pains are not marked by acuteness."⁶³ In protracted suffering the principle of the subtraction of pain from pleasure holds good. Upon this notion depends the so-called Calculus of Pleasure. This title is neither ancient nor precise; it is no more a calculus of pleasure than of pain and it might more rightly be called a calculus of advantage. The supporting text runs as follows: "The right way to judge all these pleasures and pains is by measuring them against each other and by scrutiny of the advantages and disadvantages."⁶⁴ Since it is postulated that **continuous** happiness is possible, it follows that the process is always subtraction. The pain is subtracted from the pleasure.

As for "continuous pleasures," these words acquired the status of a slogan through the teaching of Epicurus. An exhortation of his begins: "It is to continuous pleasures that I summon you."⁶⁵ The debate over the feasibility of achieving continuity was part of the protracted controversy over the rival claims of virtue and pleasure, which raged for two centuries and is rehearsed for us in the last book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.⁶⁶ As so often in the courts of law, the old advocate

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was slated to make the final address, and he won a resounding verdict for virtue, and, at the same time, hypocrisy. The Empire, being founded upon political hypocrisy, required specious labels, which Stoicism was prepared to furnish. Reason, virtue, and duty were unimpeachable catchwords, acceptable to hypocrites even more than to saints.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 7:04 AM

I am not fluent in Tusculun Disputations but it appears I am going to have to go through it again. Trying to do so quickly now, this may be the point DeWitt is describing the need to show that the good man is 'always' happy:

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X. But it is the duty of one who would argue accurately, to consider not what is said, but what is said consistently. As in that very opinion which we have adopted in this discussion, namely, that every good man is always happy: it is clear what I mean by good man: I call those both wise and good men, who are provided and adorned with every virtue. Let us see, then, who are to be called happy. I imagine, indeed, that those men are to be called so, who are possessed of good without any alloy of evil: nor is there any other notion connected with the word that expresses happiness, but an absolute enjoyment of good without any evil. Virtue cannot attain this, if there is anything good besides itself: for a crowd of evils would present themselves, if we were to allow poverty, obscurity, humility, solitude, the loss of friends, acute pains of the body, the loss of health, weakness, blindness, the ruin of one's country, banishment, slavery, to be evils: for a wise man may be afflicted by all these evils, numerous and important as they are, and many others also may be added; for they are brought on by chance, which may attack a wise man: but if these things are evils, who can maintain that a wise man is always happy, when all these evils may light on him at the same time? I therefore do not easily agree with my friend Brutus, nor with our common masters, nor those ancient ones, Aristotle, Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemon, who reckon all that I have mentioned above as evils, and yet they say that a wise man is always happy; nor can I allow them, because they are distressed with this beautiful and illustrious

further down

WHETHER VIRTUE BE SUFFICIENT FOR A HAPPY LIFE. 443

Epicurus, who, with submission to the Gods, thinks a wise man always happy. He is much charmed with the dignity of this opinion, but he never would have owned that, had he attended to himself: for what is there more inconsistent, than for one who could say that pain was the greatest or the only evil, to think also that a wise man can possibly say in the midst of his torture, How sweet is this! We are not, therefore, to form our judgment of philosophers from detached sentences, but from their consistency with themselves, and their ordinary manner of talking.

and even further down, where Epicurus is still under attack:

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the greatest evil, but the only one! Nor did he take any trouble to provide himself with those remedies which might have enabled him to bear pain; such as firmness of mind, a shame of doing anything base, exercise, and the habit of patience, precepts of courage, and a manly hardiness: but he says that he supports himself on the single recollection of past pleasures, as if any one, when the weather was so hot as that he was scarcely able to bear it, should comfort himself by recollecting that he was once in my country Arpinum, where he was surrounded on every side by cooling streams: for I do not apprehend how past pleasures can allay present evils. But when he says that a wise man is always happy, who would have no right to say so if he were consistent with himself, what may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable! Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.

XXVII. But to dismiss the subtleties of the Stoics, which

And here Cicero argues that the wise man must have his chief good 'in his power':

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never halt, as I said, on the outside and threshold of the prison: for what can be baser, what can carry a worse appearance, than to be left alone, separated from those beautiful attendants! not however that this is by any means possible: for neither can the virtues hold together without happiness, nor happiness without the virtues: so that they will not suffer her to desert them, but will carry her along with them, to whatever toments, to whatever pain they are led. For it is the peculiar quality of a wise man to do nothing that he may repent of, nothing against his inclination: but always to act nobly, with constancy, gravity, and honesty: to depend on nothing as certainty: to wonder at nothing, when it falls out, as if it appeared strange and unexpected to him: to be independent of every one, and abide by his own opinion. For my part, I cannot form an idea of anything happier than this. The conclusion of the Stoics is indeed easy; for since they are persuaded that the end of good is to live agreeably to nature, and to be consistent with that,—as a wise man should do so, not only because it is his duty, but because it is in his power, it must of course follow, that whoever has the chief good in his power, has his happiness so too. And thus the life of a wise man is always happy. You have here what I think may be confidently said of a happy life, and as things now stand, very truly also, unless you can advance something better.

Then we come to this line that is very useful in arguing that Epicurus did not hold "freedom from pain" to be the highest good. That was Hieronymus, not Epicurus:

agrees to the opinions and discipline of all.

XXX. These then are the opinions, as I think, that are held and defended: the first four are simple ones; "that nothing is good but what is honest," according to the Stoics: "nothing good but pleasure," as Epicurus maintains: "nothing good but a freedom from pain," as Hieronymus¹ asserts: "nothing good but an enjoyment of the principal, or all, or the greatest goods of nature," as Carneades maintained against the Stoics:—these are simple, the others are mixed propositions. Then there are three kinds of goods; the greatest being those of the mind, the next best those of the body, the third are external goods, as the Peripatetics call them, and the old Academics differ very little from them. Dinomachus² and Callipho³ have coupled pleasure with honesty: but Diodorus,⁴ the Peripatetic, has joined indolence to honesty. These are the opinions that have some footing; for those of Aristo,⁵ Pyrrho,⁶ Herillus,⁷ and of some others, are quite out

¹ Hieronymus was a Rhodian, and a pupil of Aristotle, flourishing about 300 B.C. He is frequently mentioned by Cicero.
² We know very little of Dinomachus. Some MSS. have Clitomachus.
³ Callipho was in all probability a pupil of Epicurus, but we have no certain information about him.
⁴ Diodorus was a Syrian, and succeeded Critolaus as the head of the Peripatetic School at Athens.

Post by "Don" of October 7, 2021 at 8:23 AM

That's a lot of post this early in the day, but I'll have something say later... Oh, I just realized that sounds more ominous than I meant it 😊 Good discussion. Look forward to reading others' responses.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 8:55 AM

Yes, this is an area where everyone especially me would profit from wider participation and comment. Just like with the extensive discussion in Tusculun Disputations, I know personally I

do not have a command of all the relevant material, and I could quite easily be missing something significant in some text I have only scanned, or not read at all -- or even in something like Sedley's "Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom" which I still haven't read!

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 8:59 AM

I am hopeful that everyone who is a regular participant will weigh in, but since I haven't seen them in a while I will tag [Bryan](#) and [Elli](#) to see if they have time to comment. Again, this section of the debate is about how to evaluate persistence or time of pleasure vs intensity or depth of pleasure, and starts around post 24 and those which just precede it: [RE: An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure](#)

Post by "Don" of October 7, 2021 at 11:05 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Again, this section of the debate is about how to evaluate persistence or time of pleasure vs intensity or depth of pleasure,

I'm going to throw a fly in the ointment here and say I think this discussion is (also) about how we select pleasures to chase and which to avoid.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 12:29 PM

Oh yes I consider that to be the same question too. I listed the factors that promoted the discussion but that's not to say there are not others factors too.

Post by "Don" of October 7, 2021 at 1:26 PM

One thing that just struck me is:

We choose which *desires* to choose and reject not pleasures.

Desires are necessary, natural, etc.; Pleasures are NOT categorized. By definition, all pleasures are "good." It is the results of desires for specific pleasures that feed into whether one chooses to fulfill a desire or not.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 2:16 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

By definition, all pleasures are "good."

That part I think we are all together on, at least here in this forum. There are no "worthy" or "unworthy" pleasures -- all pleasures are pleasing because that is how they affect us.

As to the distinction between desire and pleasure, what do you think of this from Torquatus - Reid uses the term "passions":

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[45] I ask what classification is either more profitable or more suited to the life of happiness than that adopted by Epicurus? He affirmed that there is one class of passions which are both natural and needful; another class which are natural without being needful ; a third class which are neither natural nor needful; and such are the conditions of these passions that the needful class are satisfied without much trouble or expenditure ; nor is it much that the natural passions crave, since nature herself makes such wealth as will satisfy her both easy of access and moderate in amount; and it is not possible to discover any boundary or limit to false passions.

If Cicero got Torquatus right it appears we are talking cupiditatem but also desiderant:

naturae finibus contentus sine aegritudine possit et
 45 sine metu vivere. Quae est enim aut utilior aut ad
 bene vivendum aptior partitio quam illa qua est usus
 Epicurus? qui unum genus posuit earum cupiditatum
 quae essent et naturales et necessariae, alterum quae
 naturales essent nec tamen necessariae, tertium quae
 nec naturales nec necessariae; quarum ea ratio est
 ut necessariae nec opera multa nec impensa explen-
 tur; ne naturales quidem multa desiderant, propterea
 48

45 by fear, content within the bounds that nature has
 set. Nothing could be more useful or more con-
 ductive to well-being than Epicurus's doctrine as to
 the different classes of the desires. One kind he
 classified as both natural and necessary, a second as
 natural without being necessary, and a third as
 neither natural nor necessary; the principle of
 classification being that the necessary desires are
 gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural
 desires also require but little, since nature's own
 E 49

And here is the line-by-line of Meneceus from Epicurism.info:

Meneceus 127-128

<<Prev | Letter to Meneceus | Next>>

Αναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί, καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ
 One ought to bear in mind → that → among desires → some are natural → while (others are) vain and (that) → (among the) natural (ones) → some (are) necessary →

δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνου· τῶν δὲ ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος
 while (others are) (only) natural (but unnecessary) → Of the → necessary (ones) → some → → are necessary (for happiness) → others for the → →

ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν. τούτων γὰρ ἀπλανῆς θεωρία πᾶσαν αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν
 comfort (of the body) → while (others) for → → life (itself) → → (A) correct view (of these) (matters) → → → →

ἐπανάγειν οἶδεν ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ὑγίειαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραξίαν, ἐπεὶ τοῦτο τοῦ
 [knows] (how) to lead [every choice and avoidance] back → to the [health] of the body → and the [tranquility] of the soul → because, since, as this →

μακαρίως ζῆν ἔστι τέλος. τούτου γὰρ πάντα πράττομεν, ὅπως μῆτε ἀλγῶμεν μῆτε ταρβῶμεν. ὅταν δὲ ἅπαξ τοῦτο
 → → is (the) end-goal (of living blissfully) [For the sake of] this → → we do [everything] so that → we [neither] suffer pain nor anguish → → Once this

περὶ ἡμᾶς γένηται, λύεται πᾶς ὁ τῆς ψυχῆς χειμῶν, οὐκ ἔχοντος τοῦ ζῶου βαδίζειν ὡς πρὸς ἐνδέον
 → → happens (to us) → all [hardship] → of the soul [is relieved] → → → → (as) [the] living being [does not have] to go (any further) as if → (it were) missing

τι καὶ ζητεῖν ἕτερον ᾧ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος ἀγαθὸν συμπληρώσεται. τότε γὰρ ἡδονῆς χρεῖαν
 something and to seek (something) else by which the [well-being] of the soul and of the body → may be completed → because → [we] need [pleasure]

ἔχομεν, ὅταν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ παρῆναι τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀλγῶμεν· <ὅταν δὲ μὴ ἀλγῶμεν> οὐκέτι τῆς ἡδονῆς δεόμεθα. 📄
 → when → → → in its absence → → we suffer pain → while (when) → we suffer (no) pain [we] no longer [need] → pleasure →

Perseus has the Hicks version:

"We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless ; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live. [128] He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquility of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life. For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid ; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure. Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life."

Post by "Godfrey" of October 7, 2021 at 2:56 PM

[Don](#) makes an excellent point!

Thinking out loud (as it were), pleasure is nothing more than one "side" of the faculty of feelings. That's it. It's a reflex and a guide. If the goal is a life of continuous pleasure, all that means is to continuously be aware of and be guided by your faculty of feelings. So wouldn't all the talk of duration, intensity, absence of pain and so forth really be misleading? At least it seems so in terms of daily living. Analyzing one's desires would be far more useful and effective in determining how to live pleasurably. Continuous pleasure just means, at least in this line of reasoning, that one is living well by prudently choosing and fleeing from one's desires.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 3:33 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So wouldn't all the talk of duration, intensity, absence of pain and so forth really be misleading? At least it seems so in terms of daily living. Analyzing one's desires would be far more useful and effective in determining how to live pleasurably. Continuous pleasure just means, at least in this line of reasoning, that one is living well by prudently choosing and fleeing from one's desires.

My initial reaction to splitting the discussion of desires and their results is to be wary of that, because just like virtue, what does it gain anything to talk about desires apart from the results of pursuing those desires? In the end there is nothing given by nature for the decision of what to choose and to avoid other than pleasure and pain. A science of desires separated from their consequences, would be no more helpful or useful than a science of virtue, apart from the results of pursuing those virtues.

Further and to the same point, since there is no "necessity" in human affairs, there is no more necessity as to the result of pursuing a particular desire "in general" than there is ability to predict by necessity that Hermarchus must be either alive or dead tomorrow. Certainly generalizations and predictions can be given, but absent a necessary connection between any desire and its result, we can't derive an ironclad rule, and the best we can do is make the generalization -- which is useful, but not really deeply philosophical, as it is largely dependent on context.

So rather than say that talk of duration, intensity, absence of pain and so forth might be misleading, I could see the argument as stronger that they are really all that is worth talking about, because they are the only ways of evaluating pleasures vs pains that make particular choices "good" or "bad" (in the sense of nothing good but pleasure; nothing bad but pain).

So one of the foundational issues here is whether "Are all pleasures the same in all respects so that we should consider the choice of any to be the equivalent of the choice of any other?"

I would say the answer to that is "No!" They share a certain attribute (we find them all pleasing) but not in the same degree, manner, intensity, duration, etc.

At least as for me, I definitely choose my pleasures according to those characteristics and I do not pursue all pleasures with the same intensity. Does anyone advocate that Epicurus held that we should?

Here we need to dive back into DeWitt's "Unity of Pleasure" chapter.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 3:46 PM

The Unity of Pleasure discussion:

be observed that the telos has been presented under three aspects: first, as a unitary good it is pleasure; second, as a dualistic good it is health of mind and health of body; third, in a seemingly negative aspect it is freedom from fear in the mind and pain in the body. This seeming negativism was spotted by the antagonists of Epicurus as a chink in his armor, and the arrows of their dialectic were concentrated upon it. The weakness alleged was that of calling two disparate things by the one name of pleasure.

It is plain to see how Epicurus was led to switch emphasis to this aspect of pleasure. As usual, he was working his way to greater precision in his analysis of the subject and, as will presently be shown in more detail, he discerned that according to Aristippus and Plato no such thing as continuous pleasure was possible; they recognized only peaks of pleasure separated by intervals either devoid of pleasure or neutral or mixed. From this it followed with inevitable logic that the wise man could not be happy at all times. This conclusion was repugnant to Epicurus as a thoroughgoing hedonist and was repudiated. This repudiation could be made good only by vindicating for freedom from fear and pain the status of a positive pleasure. This in turn resulted in a doctrine of the unity of all pleasure.

Though we certainly fall short of possessing the whole argument of Epicurus, there is ample evidence upon which to construct the skeleton of a case. The Feelings, as usual, are the criterion. It may be recalled how he proved life itself to be the greatest good by pointing out that the greatest joy is associated with the escape from some dreadful destruction. By a similar argument, even if not extant, it could be shown that the recovery of health is a positive pleasure when the individual

.... unfortunately DeWitt goes off into kinetic vs katastematic and doesn't really grapple with our point of whether all pleasures are the same, but:

The next step in this new analysis was to declare that this fact of extension or intension was of no fundamental importance. The high value assigned to this principle is indicated by its promulgation as Authorized Doctrine 9: "If every pleasure were alike condensed in duration and associated with the whole organism or the dominant parts of it, pleasures would never differ from one another." Positively stated, the meaning would be that pleasure is always pleasure; it is of no consequence that some pleasures are associated with the mind, others with the stomach, and others with other parts, or that some affect the whole organism and others only a part, or that some are brief and intense, others moderate and extended. In other words, it makes no difference that some pleasures are static and others kinetic. Pleasure is a unit. This unity could be expressed in ancient terminology by saying that all pleasure was a kind of motion, *kinesis* or *motio*, the ancient equivalent of reaction.

To put the colophon upon this topic it should be added that three Authorized Doctrines, Nos. 8, 9, and 10, deal with pleasure and all three imply the quality of unity. The eighth stresses the fact that the evil attaches solely to the consequences; all pleasures are alike in being good: "No pleasure is evil in itself but the practices productive of certain pleasures bring troubles in their train that by many times outweigh the pleasures themselves."

The ninth Doctrine has been quoted above. In it the item about "condensed pleasure" was pounced upon by Damoxenus of the New Comedy as a good cue for merrymaking; quite aptly he allowed a cook to dilate upon it.⁴⁰ Some five centuries afterward the frivolous Alciphron testified to the longevity of the theme by assuming it to be still good for a laugh.⁴¹

The tenth Doctrine, last of the three, serves to shift all ethical condemnation from pleasures themselves to the consequences: "If the practices productive of the pleasures of profligates dispelled the fears of the mind about celestial things and death and pains and also taught the limit of the desires, we should never have fault to find with profligates, enjoying pleasures to the full from all quarters, and suffering neither pain nor distress from any quarter, wherein the evil lies." Such

A variation of the same teaching appears in an isolated saying. "I enjoy the fullness of pleasure living on bread and water and I spit upon the pleasures of a luxurious diet, not on account of any evil in these pleasures themselves but because of the discomforts that follow upon them." ⁴² The net effect of these pronouncements is to put all pleasures in a single class, all being good, irrespective of extension or condensation or of the organ affected or of approval or disapproval, which attach only to consequences. This is an instance where Epicurus exhibited deeper insight than Plato in the latter's own field, discerning the one in the many.

All we really have from DeWitt then is the issue of all pleasures being "good" irrespective of their consequences.

So we still have to deal with the question: "*Are all pleasures the same in all respects so that we should consider the choice of any pleasure to be equivalent to the choice of any other?*"

Post by "Godfrey" of October 7, 2021 at 4:32 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So we still have to deal with the question: "Are all pleasures the same in all respects so that we should consider the choice of any pleasure to be equivalent to the choice of any other?"

Of course they're not. But at what point are we becoming Plato writing [Philebus](#)? Neither pleasures nor desires should be generalized, they are all specific to person, time, situation, etc. But isn't discussing whether duration is more important than intensity (regarding a particular Feeling) tantamount to discussing whether it's better to look at a squirrel than a tree (an admittedly poor example regarding the importance wrt a particular sensation)?

Maybe it would be more productive to examine the PDs as the best record of Epicurus' own thinking. This is off the top of my head, but if I'm not mistaken, the only mechanism that Epicurus gives for evaluating choices and avoidances is by categorizing desires.

This is getting interesting, digging into the weeds!

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2021 at 4:42 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Of course they're not

Yes of course my feelings exactly, but if we extended the point that pleasures cannot be compared or ranked in any way at all, that would be the reduction to the absurd, so in my mind that proves that this cannot have been Epicurus' meaning.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

This is off the top of my head, but if I'm not mistaken, the only mechanism that Epicurus gives for evaluating choices and avoidances is by categorizing desires.

Well there I would say that each reference goes in the direction of the purely practical: "What will happen to me if I make this choice?" So rather than "categorizing" which would be definitional logical analysis which might actually sound platonic, I would say he is emphasizing the reverse and say evaluate them pragmatically only by their results. And their results are not measured by categories but only by the resulting feeling. In that respect I see "natural and necessary" categories in that same way - strictly biological or feeling-driven, rather than by any intellectual categories.

[VS71](#). "Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?"

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

This is getting interesting, digging into the weeds!

YES!!

Post by “Don” of October 7, 2021 at 5:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

My initial reaction to splitting the discussion of desires and their results is to be wary of that, because just like virtue, what does it gain anything to talk about desires apart from the results of pursuing those desires? In the end there is nothing given by nature for the decision of what to choose and to avoid other than pleasure and pain. A science of desires separated from their consequences, would be no more helpful or useful than a science of virtue, apart from the results of pursuing those virtues.

I think we're talking about the exact opposite of this. There should be no talk of desires without talk of their results for the individual. That's what distinguishes them from talk of pleasures. Is my desire to pursue the pleasure of intoxicating beverages prudent? Depends. If I have no commitments later and don't "act the fool" to preserve my reputation, that desire could be pursued.

I think talk of a "science of desires" is a slippery slope again possibly devolves into adding up Utilitarian dolors and hedons. Epicurus endorsed simply pointing to the pursuit of pleasure of children and animals as proof of pleasure's being the good to which all other instrumental goods points. Why do we practice wisdom? Because it brings us pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

we still have to deal with the question: "Are all pleasures the same in all respects so that we should consider the choice of any pleasure to be equivalent to the choice of any other?"

I don't think all pleasures are identical. They are varied. And choices are definitely not equivalent. It's all about the consequences stemming from the desires for different pleasures. And desires for the same pleasure at different times. One time it may be prudent. Another time, not.

Post by "Don" of October 7, 2021 at 5:07 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

but if we extended the point that pleasures cannot be compared or ranked in any way at all, that would be the reduction to the absurd, so in my mind that proves that this cannot have been Epicurus' meaning.

Oh, I don't agree with that at all. We cannot rank pleasures. We CAN rank desires for pleasures in context of their place and time. I think this is exactly what Epicurus meant.

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2021 at 5:10 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

We cannot rank pleasures.

Wait are you disagreeing with Godfrey's point too when he says "of course they're not"?

I definitely rank my pleasures -- steak is much more pleasant than hot dogs.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 7, 2021 at 5:15 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Well there I would say that each reference goes in the direction of the purely practical: "What will happen to me if I make this choice?" So rather than "categorizing" which would be definitional logical analysis which might actually sound platonic, I would say he is emphasizing the reverse and say evaluate them pragmatically only by their results. And their results are not measured by categories but only by the resulting feeling. In that respect I see "natural and necessary" categories in that same way - strictly biological or feeling-driven, rather than by any intellectual categories.

To me, by giving categories of desires he's providing a method for prudent analysis of a given decision or action. The feelings are a critical part for evaluating but having the framework of categories is, to me, a major innovation: we experience feelings but we can work with desires.

Post by “Don” of October 7, 2021 at 5:24 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

We cannot rank pleasures.

Wait are you disagreeing with Godfrey's point too when he says "of course they're not"?

I definitely rank my pleasures -- steak is much more pleasant than hot dogs.

I would say you rank your desires. A desire for steak is stronger for *you.* That doesn't rank the "pleasure" derived from steak better than that from hot dogs.

Post by "Cassius" of October 7, 2021 at 7:03 PM

I honestly am not sure what you mean. Yes I can rank my desire in terms of intensity, but I would certainly say that I can rank the pleasure I get from steak as higher than the pleasure I get from hot dogs. I see both "desire" and "pleasure" to be terms that include many different instances, each of which is capable of being ranked in degrees of greater or lesser.

I would have thought that to be a totally non-controversial statement.

Are you using a definition of these terms differently than I am?

Post by "Godfrey" of October 7, 2021 at 7:46 PM

LM 127, Epicurus Wiki: *One should keep in mind that among desires, some are natural and some are vain. Of those that are natural, some are necessary and some unnecessary. Of those that are necessary, some are necessary for happiness, some for health, and some for life itself. A correct view of these matters enables one to base every choice and avoidance upon whether it secures or upsets bodily comfort and peace of mind - the goal of a happy life.*

LM 127, Long and Sedley's The Hellenistic Philosophers: *We must reckon that some desires are natural and others empty, and of the natural some are necessary, others natural only; and of*

the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the body's freedom from stress, and others for life itself. For the steady observation of these things makes it possible to refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the soul's freedom from disturbance, since this is the end belonging to the blessed life.

Skipping over meats for a moment, there's the above from the Letter to Menoecus. The underlined portion, to me, says that without understanding the categories of desire we wouldn't be able to make proper decisions relating to pleasure. Which implies, to me, that if we want to usefully rank anything it would be desires, not pleasures.

I still want to dig into the PDs, but I just ran across this 🤔

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2021 at 8:29 PM

i interpret those terms to be equivalent to pleasure and pain, so I don't see a distinction, as they essentially in my understanding constitute the basis for any categories which we may choose to construct in our minds (which categories don't really "exist" except to the extent we choose to use them to describe our feelings).

I think we're possibly diverging in this conversation due to my interpreting this is another example of uses of "words" which have no meaning except as we define them, and our definitions never are able to create reality - the reality is only in our feelings and not in any categories or forms.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 7, 2021 at 9:00 PM

I was trying to point out that "these things" or "these matters", being the various categories of desires, "makes it possible" or "enables one" to refer choices and avoidances to pleasure and pain. So, conversely, without understanding the categories of desires one can't make proper decisions regarding pleasure and pain.

It wasn't my intention to question that bodily health and freedom from disturbance could refer to anything other than pleasure in this instance. Apologies for the lack of clarity!

Post by “Cassius” of October 7, 2021 at 9:23 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

So, conversely, without understanding the categories of desires one can't make proper decisions regarding pleasure and pain.

I think we are communicating, because I think what you write there is pretty clear, but I am not sure we are agreeing 😊

I have always looked at it pretty much from the reverse perspective, influenced by Rackham's translation of Torquatus:

45 Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus's doctrine as to the different classes of the desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered. 14 46 If then we observe that ignorance and error reduce the whole of life to confusion, while Wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of appetite and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and peace, why should we hesitate to avow that Wisdom is to be desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and Folly to be avoided because of its injurious consequences?

To me, the "principle of the classification" is the key, and the principle does not derived from human-described categories, but from the nature of the activities involved. Breathing, for example, is absolutely natural and necessary through the nature of things, but not because we ourselves recognized it is as category. On the other hand things which are unnecessary and unnatural (absolute political power, maybe?) have no limit because we can always ask for more. Again, that's from the nature of the situation, not because we categorize it that way.

So from my point of view the understanding of the principle involved is not really an invitation to categorize intellectually, but just a recognition that the closer to absolutely natural you get, nature has made those easiest to obtain, while the opposite nature has made the hardest, with the recognition being that the hardest requires the most pain and the easiest requires the least pain.

But in the end, the whole exercise is nothing more than posing the same question: How much pain is my chosen pleasure going to cost me to obtain? And in that, you rank the intensity and satisfaction you get from your pleasure, and you rank the intensity and length of the pain it is going to cost you, and you make a totally personal and subjective decision based on your own

unique circumstances.

The result (to me) is that you've performed a mental exercise that really does nothing but help you reflect on what you expect to be the pleasure and pain that you yourself expect to experience, and you decide to go forward or not on that basis.

That's really the way the spreadsheet we talked about was set up. You can perform the mental exercise of thinking about these things, but there's no way in the end to make the final decision except for you yourself to decide how much you value a particular pleasure, and how much you mind the particular pain you expect that to cost, and then you go ahead or not based on your own estimation of "is it worth it to me." And in the final analysis the dividing up into categories has pretty much zero to do with the final result. You keep those in minds and thumbnail aids to thinking, but they don't dictate anything in and of themselves, and more than the spreadsheet model dictates anything. There's no "necessity" in human action so there's no way to reduce these questions to across the board formulas that always apply. Even breathing you can give up for a few minutes if it's necessary to swim through a flooded corridor to get out of a sinking submarine. The rules of thumb are always rules of thumb and never absolute categories in themselves.

Maybe the bottom line is that the categories we are discussing are "useful" but not necessary and in fact don't add a lot if you just use common sense to evaluate the situation carefully. And if we ever move to the point where the categories become hard and fast rules in themselves, then we have moved into the same danger as when "virtue" seems to be an end in and of itself. And in fact some writers do seem to state or at least imply that Epicurus held that we should always and only pursue pleasures that are natural AND necessary, which I do not think he would say at all -- or at least - Epicurus certainly did not live that way himself, with his relatively wealthy living with multiple pieces of real estate, material goods, and even slaves. The same would go for Atticus especially, nor do I understand that the historical record reveals even a single Epicurean reputed for his or her truly ascetic living.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 7, 2021 at 10:09 PM

Communicating is a good start! 😄

So to me the key idea is that desires are fundamentally different from pleasures. At least this is how I understand it. As to categories, I think that Epicurus would consider his categories of desires to be "natural", but a useful tool.

Unfortunately my dinner is getting cold so I'll need to come back to this....

Post by “Don” of October 8, 2021 at 12:03 AM

After having read the above exchange, I don't know whether we're farther along or not. I'm going to summarize my thoughts. Take from this what you will.

Pleasure can be experienced from ... Let's say, drinking wine.

Some people desire the pleasure of drinking wine. This is a natural but unnecessary desire. One could satisfy one's thirst simply by drinking water. Maybe this person wants to vary their pleasure. The person who desires the pleasure experienced by drinking wine weighs the pain in procuring the wine (minimal), any resulting pain (enjoy in moderation, minimal pain), commits to not acting foolish (maintain reputation, no pain). The desire to experience the pleasure of intoxicating beverages in this context can be experienced with minimal pain. Go ahead.

Another person who struggles with alcoholism weighs the desire for the pleasure of intoxicating beverages much differently.

The *pleasure* of drinking wine stays the same. Two people drinking wine will experience pleasure. They may decide to pursue their desires for wine drinking for very different reasons.

The desire to experience the pleasure of drinking wine is completely contextual and subjective.

The decision to indulge the desire to experience this specific pleasure is completely personal, subjective, and contextual.

There is no consideration necessary of the duration, intensity, etc. of the specific *pleasure* itself of drinking wine. What will be the result of this desire if it is fulfilled? If not? The decision to pursue one's desire to experience the pleasure derived from drinking wine is completely contingent on personal factors and subjective feelings of what pain and pleasure will result from whether this desire is fulfilled or not.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 8, 2021 at 2:22 AM

Quote from Cassius

But in the end, the whole exercise is nothing more than posing the same question: How much pain is my chosen pleasure going to cost me to obtain? And in that, you rank the intensity and satisfaction you get from your pleasure, and you rank the intensity and

length of the pain it is going to cost you, and you make a totally personal and subjective decision based on your own unique circumstances.

The result (to me) is that you've performed a mental exercise that really does nothing but help you reflect on what you expect to be the pleasure and pain that you yourself expect to experience, and you decide to go forward or not on that basis.

I agree with much of this, but I still think that there are subtle but useful differences between desire and pleasure.

- Pleasure is a Feeling, a faculty, a criterion or measurement. Desire is not.
- To my limited understanding, pleasure and desire are neurologically/biochemically different.
- Pleasure is "The Goal", desire is not.
- As a Feeling and as "The Goal", pleasure is what organisms strive for from birth in order to thrive. Desire is something that can be either good or bad, and often needs to be reined in.
- For me, when considering whether or not to do or partake of a given thing, there's a significant difference between thinking of something as a desire as opposed to a pleasure. Thinking of it as a pleasure, which is inherently good, means that it is worth pursuing on its own merits but may end up involving more pain than pleasure. Thinking of it as a desire, which I posit that it is until it is experienced, means that it may not even be worth pursuing on its own merits. For me, this greatly simplifies decision making. For someone else it may not. I see the exercise of evaluating desires, which Epicurus proposes through the use of his categories, as more "scientifically" (for lack of a better word at the moment) and psychologically sound than trying to rank duration and intensity of pleasures and pains. At a minimum, it provides an alternative method for choosing and avoiding. The bottom line I imagine is to work with and compare both methods.
- Again for me, I find evaluating desires to be good for a first pass at choosing. Sometimes that's all that I do, other times I take another pass and consider pleasures v pains. It's something of a process.

Post by "Cassius" of October 8, 2021 at 8:16 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

There is no consideration necessary of the duration, intensity, etc. of the specific *pleasure* itself of drinking wine. What will be the result of this desire if it is fulfilled? If not? The decision to pursue one's desire to experience the pleasure derived from drinking wine is completely contingent on personal factors and subjective feelings of what pain and pleasure will result from whether this desire is fulfilled or not.

See in that first sentence i would say that it is impossible and illogical to evaluate the result without considering each of the factors (duration intensity etc) that we are discussing. The result IS largely those resulting factors, is it not?

Post by "Cassius" of October 8, 2021 at 8:18 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I still think that there are subtle but useful differences between desire and pleasure.

- Pleasure is a Feeling, a faculty, a criterion or measurement. Desire is not.

- To my limited understanding, pleasure and desire are neurologically/biochemically different.

- Pleasure is "The Goal", desire is not.

I agree with this, but probably more is needed to define what desire really is.

Are we talking a Nietzschean "will to power" -- some kind of basic urge of the will that would cause someone to look at something pleasureable that he or she might experience without any pain at all but would cause him to say "Nah, I don't think i will partake of that pleasure, I just don't want to."

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2021 at 11:03 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I agree with this, but probably more is needed to define what desire really is.

The word Epicurus uses when talking about natural, necessary, etc is επιθυμία epithymia:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐπιθυμία](#)

I'll admit I have only the barest knowledge of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Using Epicurus's method of using what the generally-accepted definition of a word is, I'd offer that a "desire" is a mental concept sensing a need for some thing one does not currently have or for an experience one is not currently undergoing. One senses a lack or void that one feels needs to be filled. Whether one fills that sensed need is the crux of making choices and rejections.

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2021 at 11:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

There is no consideration necessary of the duration, intensity, etc. of the specific *pleasure* itself of drinking wine. What will be the result of this desire if it is fulfilled? If not? The decision to pursue one's desire to experience the pleasure derived from drinking wine is completely contingent on personal factors and subjective feelings of what pain and pleasure will result from whether this desire is fulfilled or not.

See in that first sentence i would say that it is impossible and illogical to evaluate the result without considering each of the factors (duration intensity etc) that we are discussing. The result IS largely those resulting factors, is it not?

I wouldn't say the *result* is the duration/intensity. The result is what happens *after* the desire is filled or experienced; After you've experienced the duration/intensity. The decision of whether or not to fulfill a specific desire is contingent on what happens if it's fulfilled or what happens if it's not, after the experience. How much pleasure ensues from fulfilling this desire balanced against how much pain ensues from fulfilling that desire. I desire/decide to undergo

the pain of exercise because the **result** I desire is a healthier life. I sense a lack of exercise is detrimental and I desire to fill that lack. The result I wish to achieve is a healthier life.

Admittedly, this is very stream of consciousness. I reserve the right to revise and extend my remarks. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 8, 2021 at 11:43 AM

I see this related to "Choices and Avoidances" as well, which I gather is a title to one of Epicurus' works.

So OK we have at least two high-level questions:

(1) What is the relationship between desire and pleasure?

That needs to be pursued, but I am thinking that we are beginning to stray from the original question of

(2) What is the meaning of "Most pleasant"(?) [That was based on the comment in the post above to the effect that Don submits: *"I interpret that "the most pleasant" with the idea of pleasure *over a period of time.* The *length* of time is not the focus; it's the *persistence* of pleasure over the time in question."*]

Post by “Cassius” of October 8, 2021 at 12:07 PM

[Godfrey](#) for a long time I've observed that one of the approaches I like least is Nussbaum's "Therapy of Desire."

It seems to me there is definitely an issue in focusing on "desire" as opposed to "pleasure" but I don't have a handle on what the issue would be.

Do you agree with Don's: I'd offer that a "desire" is a mental concept sensing a need for some thing one does not currently have or for an experience one is not currently undergoing. One senses a lack or void that one feels needs to be filled. Whether one fills that sensed need is the crux of making choices and rejections. "

I am not sure whether it is clear to me that a desire is a "mental concept" or a feeling or what?

I think you can write down and define a desire much better than you can a pleasure, but I am not sure I see them as entirely separate things, especially in the way the words are commonly used.

At the moment I am just not sure about the implications of these words at all.

Post by “Don” of October 8, 2021 at 12:09 PM

The larger context of that phrase is:

Quote from Epicurus

...the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest.

So, he's specifically talking about enjoying the most pleasant time. Not a specific pleasure. The phrase is in the context of talking about the span of one's life. A life doesn't have to be long to be the "most pleasant." What makes the pleasant life? I go back to Cicero's Torquatus:

Quote from Cicero

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?

Post by “Don” of October 8, 2021 at 12:11 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(1) What is the relationship between desire and pleasure?

We desire to experience pleasure.

We desire to avoid pain.

Post by "Cassius" of October 8, 2021 at 12:26 PM

I would say that may be too broad. Can't we desire to feel pain in order to experience more pleasure later?

On the other hand, while we are feeling pain or pleasure we are feeling it without thinking why - we just feel it.

Is that not a difference?

Is not a desire somehow more "willed" while pleasure and pain are simply reactions?

That gets back to pathe right? A desire is not a pathe is it?

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2021 at 12:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that may be too broad. Can't we desire to feel pain in order to experience more pleasure later?

We choose to experience pain for a larger **pleasure**. We don't desire to experience pain.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

On the other hand, while we are feeling pain or pleasure we are feeling it without thinking why - we just feel it.

Right. We feel pleasure and pain resulting from a specific desire being fulfilled.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is not a desire somehow more "willed" while pleasure and pain are simply reactions?

Desires are conscious thoughts - "longings" - for something.

Pleasure and pain are the feelings we experience which help us choose which desires to fulfill and which to reject.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That gets back to pathe right? A desire is not a pathe is it?

A desire is an επιθυμία epithymia; pain and pleasure are παθη pathe. Yes, two different words. Two different "things."

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2021 at 12:50 PM

I would also add we can consciously desire something. We can think about wanting something. We don't get a choice but to experience pain or pleasure when it's happening. We react. If I hit my thumb with a hammer, I feel pain! I don't get to decide if it's painful, it just is.

Now, I can "will" myself to endure the pain... like the experiments that have subjects hold their hand in ice water. Those who swear can more readily withstand the cold longer than those who are not allowed to swear. They are both experiencing pain but one group experiences it as less painful. Same stimulus, different reactions.

Post by "Cassius" of October 8, 2021 at 1:42 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

We feel pleasure and pain resulting from a specific desire being fulfilled.

But remember I think it is clear too that we also feel pleasure or pain independently of any desire -- things happen to us which we did not plan in any way. I think we are not veering into the discussion of "replenishment" theory of pleasure and similar, because the reason this comes to mind is that there is apparently a classical example of walking outside and smelling a rose or flower -- you in no way planned or anticipated or lacked anything prior to that moment, but when the fragrance came to your nose you experienced pleasure that was in no way related to a "lack" of anything. Or at least that is what I have read somewhere in philosophy writings.

Post by "Don" of October 8, 2021 at 2:03 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

it is clear too that we also feel pleasure or pain independently of any desire

Absolutely! The literal definition of πάθη pathē is "what is done or what happens to a person." See my #71 above that you reacted to. That's why desires and pleasure (& pain) are two very different things. We can choose our desires. Pleasure and pain will happen to us irregardless of whether we choose one over the other or not. What Epicurus's philosophy does is give us a goal toward which to direct what choices we make about which desires to pursue and which to reject at any given time depending on our context and circumstances.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 8, 2021 at 9:42 PM

Pardon the delay.... Referring back to post #66, here's the Wikipedia link for desire fwiw:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desire>. I haven't had the chance to read the whole article but this excerpt from the beginning is to me pretty spot. I've underlined one sentence but the rest is also pertinent.

Quote

Desires are states of mind that are expressed by terms like "wanting", "wishing", "longing" or "craving". A great variety of features is commonly associated with desires. They are seen as propositional attitudes towards conceivable states of affairs. They aim to change the world by representing how the world should be, unlike beliefs, which aim to represent how the world actually is. Desires are closely related to agency: they motivate the agent to realize them. For this to be possible, a desire has to be combined with a belief about which action would realize it. Desires present their objects in a favorable light, as something that appears to be good. Their fulfillment is normally experienced as pleasurable in contrast to the negative experience of failing to do so. Conscious desires are usually accompanied by some form of emotional response. While many researchers roughly agree on these general features, there is significant disagreement about how to define desires, i.e. which of these features are essential and which ones are merely accidental. Action-based theories define desires as structures that incline us toward actions. Pleasure-based theories focus on the tendency of desires to cause pleasure when fulfilled. Value-based theories identify desires with attitudes toward values, like judging or having an appearance that something is good.

I wouldn't *limit* a desire to a mental concept, it could also be a physical or psychological craving.

I'm not very familiar with Nussbaum. Is she in the "absence of pain" camp? I can see how, if one was so inclined, they could mistakenly interpret Epicurus' categories of desires as tending toward asceticism. I look at them more along the lines of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which maybe could be thought of as a positive, not negative, hedonic treadmill. More of a hedonic ladder.

Post by “Don” of October 8, 2021 at 10:33 PM

Good post, [Godfrey](#) . Pulling out a couple more sentences for emphasis from the WP article:

- Desires are closely related to agency: they motivate the agent to realize them
- [Desires'] fulfillment is normally experienced as pleasurable in contrast to the negative experience of failing to do so.
- there is significant disagreement about how to define desires (This one made me laugh... Yeah, Wikipedia, no kidding!)
- Pleasure-based theories focus on the tendency of desires to cause pleasure when fulfilled. (This one does seem spot-on to how we're trying to define desires here)

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I wouldn't limit a desire to a mental concept, it could also be a physical or psychological craving.

Trying to wrap my head around your statement here. Are you referring to things like addiction? A "desire" that is more of an involuntary craving? I would categorize addiction or craving as different from a desire. A desire - in my mind - has to be voluntarily brought to mind. You have to have agency to decide to fulfill the desire or not. Yes, I'm picking up on agency from Wikipedia. A craving for an addiction takes the agency out of the picture. But.. hmm.. what about a strong desire to possess something or to be with someone? Still working all this out.

The sense I was trying to get across with the "a desire is a mental concept" is that a desire is something you can think about. In fact, the thought "I want X" (and its many permutations) is itself the desire. On the other hand, pleasure and pain are something that happens to you. You can think about the feelings of pleasure and pain after they occur.. or before they occur if you have a desire for something. Pleasure and pain are, after all, what we attempt to experience or avoid, respectively. But, in the moment, pleasure or pain just happens. You can desire lunch

with a friend. You can schedule lunch with a friend. But during the lunch with a friend you experience the feeling of pleasure welling up. You can't think "Now, I will experience pleasure." That's like that beer commercial from a number of years ago where the person says, "[Commence relaxation NOW!](#)"

Quote

The commercials ... make fun of a certain Teutonic obsession with control, using various scenarios whose humor would come through whether it was a beer ad or a late-night comedy skit. In one, a blond actor struggles to get comfortable on a couch for a relaxation session. He is wearing a stiff white shirt and tie and is listening to a compact disk titled "Das Kalm." "Commence relaxation now," an offscreen voice commands. It does not work out well. "Germans don't do laid back," the announcer intones in an unmistakable German accent. "They do beer."

(PS... with apologies to [Martin](#) btw)

It's that idea of willing something that needs to be allowed to arise naturally that I'm trying to get at. Pleasure and pain can't be willed. They can be nurtured and chosen but you can't say "Commence feeling pleasure NOW!". You can say, "I desire this experience that will result in pleasure."

Post by "Godfrey" of October 9, 2021 at 1:02 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The sense I was trying to get across with the "a desire is a mental concept" is that a desire is something you can think about. In fact, the thought "I want X" (and its many permutations) is itself the desire. On the other hand, pleasure and pain are something that happens to you.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around desire as well. [Don](#) I think we're in agreement as to pleasure, although I'm not sure whether [Cassius](#) agrees with our take. (???)

The first sentence of the Wikipedia quote lists desire as wanting, wishing, longing or craving; I've also seen it called an emotion. I agree that agency is key to desire, I'm just not sure how it all fits together.

Thinking this through, say for example that you had just decided to give up alcohol. You find yourself walking in Munich and suddenly you are strolling by a beer garden and see and smell some of the excellent local beer. Wham! You get hit by a tremendous craving for some delicious golden brew: it's visceral. But you have agency to decide whether or not to give in to the desire. Is your mental concept the "place" where the agency comes from? Further, it's possible that you would just experience a feeling of pleasure from the sights, sounds and smells of the garden, the day, and the people enjoying themselves, without any desire at all. I'm not sure that this clarifies anything, but I've just experienced mental pleasure by imagining this scenario! Maybe mixed with just a tiny taste of desire... 😊

Bottoms up!

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 1:40 AM

As is usual when we start talking about the natural and necessary analysis I end up thinking I am being too hard on it. I so think it is used as a justification for asceticism by those who are inclined to it for other reasons, but I think that is "their problem" and it is not inherent in the analysis. I think one can easily be oriented toward normal pleasure maximization (as I think Epicurus was) and use the observations simply as a tool of analysis for how much trouble to expect from any course of action. No harm in that UNLESS one has already bought into the goal of avoiding pain "at any cost."

Yes Godfrey I see that in Nussbaum, but that is likely because she is strongly disposed towards the Stoics, and not because Stoicism was hiding in Epicurus' when he penned the doctrine.

We can go as far as we need to in analysis of this issue of how desire relates to pleasure, but let's not forget to come back to the reason we got into it: how does one analyze and determine what Epicurus' meant when he said not to choose which pleasure is longest but which is "most pleasant."

If we don't get back to it soon though I suspect we will have lost track of Philia and the reason for her posting the thread 😊

Post by “Don” of October 9, 2021 at 6:32 AM

I'm going to duplicate my post from above on that phrase "most pleasant" so it doesn't get lost. @Nate 's excellent compilation of PD translations might prove helpful in this analysis as well.

[Quote from Don](#)

The larger context of that phrase is:

Quote from Epicurus

...the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest.

So, he's specifically talking about enjoying the most pleasant time. Not a specific pleasure. The phrase is in the context of talking about the span of one's life. A life doesn't have to be long to be the "most pleasant." What makes the most pleasant life? I go back to Cicero's Torquatus:

Quote from Cicero

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?

Post by “Don” of October 9, 2021 at 7:19 AM

[Cassius](#) is right and we need to return to [Kalosyni](#) 's original list that started this thread and what is meant when an Epicurean talks about pleasure. [Godfrey](#) 's mention of Maslow's hierarchy above reminded me of a post I wrote last year. Here's the applicable excerpt:

Quote

I was listening to a TED Radio Hour today about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs... and realized it seemed VERY Epicurean: KD 29: Among desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural and unnecessary, and some are unnatural and unnecessary (arising instead from groundless opinion). The necessary desires are at the bottom. To not be hungry, etc. The need for security is the social contract Epicurus talks about. Love and friendship is next. It gets a little more fuzzy with self-esteem and

self-actualization but I think the similarities remain and are worth exploring!

I wanted to emphasize again - at the risk of derailing the thread immediately - that those categories pertain to desires not pleasure. We *need* air, food, water, shelter. We can gain pleasure from those "necessary needs", but it is a necessary desire to seek air, food, water, shelter. Without wanting, seeking, and procuring adequate air, we die. Without adequate food, we die. Etc. There is an agency to making sure we have those necessary desires filled. Fulfilling those desires also gives us pleasure and removes pain. Think of swimming underwater. We can decide to stay under as long as possible, but at some point we're going to "desire" to breathe. Our heads splash through the surface and we take in a big breath of air. Ahhhhhh!! Yeah, baby! That's the pleasure. So, my contention is that a desire need not be grand. It need not be capital-D Desire. Just like pleasure doesn't need to be capital-P Pleasure. There are things that we desire because they're necessary for living, and only the living can experience pleasure. Then pleasures can be varied. We can desire different foods, clothing, shelter, etc. A desire for those varieties are "unnecessary" in the sense that any food would do if we were starving, but there's nothing "wrong" or "bad" about deriving pleasure from fulfilling a desire for shrimp rather than bread when it comes to the "necessary" desire for food as long as it's not an undue struggle or painful process of fulfilling that variety.

Again, this was all very stream of consciousness so I'm hoping [Kalosyni](#) is at least getting pleasure from reading these digressions. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 8:32 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I'm going to duplicate my post from above on that phrase "most pleasant" so it doesn't get lost.

I am thinking it would be helpful to go through and collect the posts specifically on desire vs pleasure and "copy" (as opposed to move) them to either a new thread or an existing one on the same topic. What do you think?

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 8:38 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

So, my contention is that a desire need not be grand. It need not be capital-D Desire. Just like pleasure doesn't need to be capital-P Pleasure. There are things that we desire because they're necessary for living, and only the living can experience pleasure.

Yes I think we all agree on that (I am not saying "Why did you bother to repeat it?" but rather. "Yes that is one of our fundamental presumptions.")

The next step though is significantly harder, which is the analysis of "ranking" pleasures not only on a necessary scale, but on some other scale, such as (1) natural, but also (2 ad infinitum) with words such as "intensity" or "depth of feeling" or "importance to 'us' as individuals, rather than just "us as human beings who have to eat, sleep, etc."

We can probably start with the "natural" because that is in Menoecus and Torquatus, but I have always found that term significantly harder to apply than "necessary." I don't think the key either is "whether it has a limit" because necessary pleasures too have a limit (air, food, water, etc) so there must be some other factor than "having a limit" which distinguishes "natural." So one place to start is to try to get a grip on "natural."

But I don't think even those two give us the subjective element of "intensity" or "depth of feeling" or "importance to 'us' as individuals, rather than just 'us' as human beings" and I surely think that Epicurus did not deprecate those other than perhaps to the "necessary" in the sense that "pleasure has no meaning except to the living" and if we don't get the necessary pleasures we don't remain living very long.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 8:44 AM

Our target, here, I think - at the end of the day - will include that we have a cogent and potent response to criticism that Epicureans would limit our ambition in life to "grazing in the grass" -- otherwise known as the "animality objection" - from Cicero and Aristotle and of course others:

I. The Animality Objection

The target	(Egoistic) Ethical Hedonism: One should act always for the sake of one's own pleasure.
The objection	Humans and nonhumans animals should not have the same ultimate end (an ultimate end is that for the sake which one should do everything one does).
	T1 Cicero, <u>Fin.</u> 2.109 <i>Quare aliud aliquod, Torquate, hominis summum bonum reperiendum est, voluptatem bestiis concedamus.</i> Therefore, Torquatus, some other supreme good must be found for a human being. Let us leave pleasure to the nonhuman animals.
Mere Rhetoric?	I. A tradition of anthropocentric and classist dismissal of hedonism
	T2 Cicero, <u>Fin.</u> 2.111 <i>Nec tamen ullo modo summum pecudis bonum et hominis idem mihi videri potest.</i> I cannot in any way think that humans and livestock have the same supreme good.
	T3 Aristotle, EN I.5 1095b19-20 (Cf. Heraclitus frs. 4 and 29, and Plato, <u>Rep.</u> 586a-b) οἱ μὲν οὖν πολλοὶ παντελῶς ἀνθραποδώδεις φαίνονται βοσκημάτων βίον προαιρούμενοι... Most entirely slavish people clearly choose the life of cattle...

Post by "Don" of October 9, 2021 at 8:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The next step though is significantly harder, which is the analysis of "ranking" pleasures

Please don't take this as some kind of ad hominem, because it's not meant that way...

But why?

Why do you want or need to rank pleasures?

I thought the "All pleasure is good" precluded the ranking of pleasure.

Maybe ranking desires for specific pleasures is possible (Epicurus did do that after a fashion with necessary, natural, etc.), but by definition pleasure is good.

I might even amend my post above to say the pleasure of breathing, eating, are both natural and necessary. The desire to eat shrimp instead of bread is natural but not necessary.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 8:46 AM

We cross posted -- much of the answer to your question is in the "animality objection" in post 82 above.

[Quote from Don](#)

I thought the "All pleasure is good" precluded the ranking of pleasure.

That would be correct if we considered all pleasure is good" to mean "all pleasure is THE highest good" but it is by no means clear (at least to me) that Epicurus was considering "good" here in that absolute sense, rather than in the relative sense in which there are many goods, some better than others. That's the reason for the SUMMUM in the "summum bonum" I think.

Another way of stating the question is that if he had been consistent, as soon as Epicurus formulated his philosophy he should have retired to his cave and lived a subsistence existence totally apart from the crowd. But he did not -- he lived a life of relative material luxury and devoted much of his time to philosophical controversy. Why - one naturally would ask? And I think the answer has to be in part that he valued the pleasures that he chose to pursue more highly - much more highly - than the pleasures he would have achieved had he retired to the cave on bread and water.

He chose - not the life of a cow - but the life of a supreme philosophical warrior and veritable "savior" of mankind! 😊

And I would say that what seems like the obvious answer to me is that he chose the pleasures derived from the life of philosophical study and writing and controversy as much more pleasant to him than the life of "grazing in the grass."

Post by “Don” of October 9, 2021 at 9:42 AM

LOL! Okay, it's my turn to say, "Oh, my! 😊 "

Off to work now, but I'll try to post tonight.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 12:04 PM

As usual our opponent is Cicero, but also as usual he does us the favor of both preserving Epicurean texts and pointing out for us the salvos we must deflect and return fire against.

From Book 6:

Quote

He therefore cleansed men’s breasts with truth-telling precepts and fixed a limit to lust and fear and explained what was the chief good which we all strive to reach, and pointed out the road along which by a short cross-track we might arrive at it in a straightforward course; he showed too what evils existed in mortal affairs throughout, rising up and manifoldly flying about by a natural –call it chance or force, because nature had so brought it about – **and from what gates you must sally out duly to encounter each**; and he proved that mankind mostly without cause arouse in their breast the melancholy tumbling billows of cares.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 9, 2021 at 2:25 PM

I agree with [Don](#) in post #83. And I would add that to me the only point in ranking pleasures is to argue with opponents of Epicurus. The end result of that is comparable to having a fourth leg of the Canon: it's an interpretation that tries to accommodate someone who isn't necessarily interested in understanding EP but rather in undermining it. So I think at some point we reach a limit to the value of studying Cicero if our goal is to live the philosophy. I realize though that there are two agendas here: living the philosophy and promoting/defending the philosophy.

Quote

PD 9: If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts, then the pleasures would never differ from one another.

I would paraphrase this as "it's silly to rank pleasures" 😊

"The most pleasant", to me, refers to a life, not to a pleasure. And the most pleasant life would be one that has been fully aware of available pleasures and has worked to maintain those pleasures through prudent management of desires.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 2:49 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I realize though that there are two agendas here: living the philosophy and promoting/defending the philosophy.

Yes, that's legitimate.

But in other words, Godfrey, you're refusing to argue with Cicero that you're not a cow? 😊

Post by “Don” of October 9, 2021 at 3:28 PM

Mooooooooo

PS. On second thought...Oink

Post by “Godfrey” of October 9, 2021 at 3:31 PM

I would argue that Cicero is a cow 😊

At first blush my bovine rebuttal is that it's true that all organic life possesses the faculty of Feelings to some degree. What distinguishes you and I, but not Cicero (partly because he's dead) from a cow is our degree of awareness of our Feelings.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 9, 2021 at 4:23 PM

Returning to my obsession with pleasure v desire, I'd add the thought that perhaps when you are fully aware of your pleasure, you aren't experiencing desire. This doesn't mean that desire is opposed to pleasure, only that it can result in pleasure and is different from pleasure. If pleasure and desire were equivalent then you would experience maximum desire at the same time as maximum pleasure. I find that that isn't the case. Therefore it doesn't make sense to rank or categorize pleasures, at least not in the same way as desires. I think that this begins to separate the idea of absence of pain from the categories of desire, and might prove to be a rebuttal to the ascetic argument upon further development.... 🤔

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2021 at 6:53 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Returning to my obsession with pleasure v desire,

Godfrey the thread is getting long and I don't remember - did you suggest a definition of those two words. I remember I think that Don did but I am not sure I remember yours.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 9, 2021 at 7:58 PM

Desire, Wikipedia excerpt from post #74:

"Desires are states of mind that are expressed by terms like "wanting", "wishing", "longing" or "craving". A great variety of features is commonly associated with desires. They are seen as propositional attitudes towards conceivable states of affairs. They aim to change the world by

representing how the world should be, unlike beliefs, which aim to represent how the world actually is. Desires are closely related to agency: they motivate the agent to realize them. For this to be possible, a desire has to be combined with a belief about which action would realize it. Desires present their objects in a favorable light, as something that appears to be good. Their fulfillment is normally experienced as pleasurable in contrast to the negative experience of failing to do so. Conscious desires are usually accompanied by some form of emotional response. While many researchers roughly agree on these general features, there is significant disagreement about how to define desires, i.e. which of these features are essential and which ones are merely accidental. Action-based theories define desires as structures that incline us toward actions. Pleasure-based theories focus on the tendency of desires to cause pleasure when fulfilled. Value-based theories identify desires with attitudes toward values, like judging or having an appearance that something is good."

Pleasure: I can't remember if I posted a specific definition other than to describe pleasure as a perception which is one of the two aspects of the faculty of Feelings.

Post by "Don" of October 9, 2021 at 10:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We cross posted -- much of the answer to your question is in the "animality objection" in post 82 above.

[Quote from Don](#)

I thought the "All pleasure is good" precluded the ranking of pleasure.

That would be correct if we considered "all pleasure is good" to mean "all pleasure is THE highest good" but it is by no means clear (at least to me) that Epicurus was considering "good" here in that absolute sense, rather than in the relative sense in which there are many goods, some better than others. That's the reason for the SUMMUM in the "summum bonum" I think.

Okay, let me finally return to my "Oh, my"...

Pleasure is "THE highest good" not because it is the "Best Bestest Good Out Of All The Other Goods."

It is "The Good" because it is the good thing to which all other possible candidates for "The Good Thing" leads. It is *The Good*, the Tagathon, the Goal, the Telos at the End of every action or desire. It is NOT "good" *relative* to other goods. It is THE GOOD. There are no rivals.

Virtue cannot be The Good because ultimately we act virtuously because it is instrumental to pleasure.

Wisdom cannot be The Good because we act wisely ultimately because it is instrumental to feelings of pleasure.

Philosophy cannot be The Good because we follow a philosophy because it will lead us to pleasure.

EVERYTHING points to pleasure. Pleasure sits at the top of the heap of possible candidates for The Good BECAUSE it is the final destination, The Goal, the Telos, the End. That is why it's the *SUMMUM* bonum. It is at the *summit* of goods. All paths up the mountain pass virtue, wisdom, etc., along the way and what sits at the end of the path at the top... why do we do the things we do? ... To achieve pleasure! The *SUMMUM* denotes the top or the summit. It is literally the highest good. It is the good "at the utmost, at farthest." Every path, followed to its end, leads ultimately to pleasure. Pleasure is literally The End at the end of the path.

This is also an argument against viewing some pleasures being "higher" than others. PLEASURE writ large is the telos, the goal, the end, the highest good. We chase pleasure in all its myriad and varied forms.

Aristotle didn't accept pleasure as The Good because (according to [the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)) "pleasure cannot be our ultimate target, because what counts as pleasant must be judged by some standard other than pleasure itself, namely the judgment of the virtuous person." That's circular reasoning it seems to me. Pleasure can't be the ultimate good because there needs to be a standard of pleasure judged by some virtuous person?? That's one reason why Epicurus said Pleasure IS The Standard for our choices. There is no other "authority" - no virtuous person - judging our actions except does this choice lead to pleasure.

Now, this didn't deter Epicurus from saying, "Yes, all pleasure is good, but that pleasure you're thinking about choosing... Experience has shown that leads ultimately to pain, not the most pleasant life. Okaaay, you do the drugs all night, drink til dawn if you choose to. BUT you're going to pay a hefty price tomorrow and even more if you keep it up. But I will not argue that you aren't feeling pleasure in the moment. I'll let the Cyrenaics know you'll be knocking at their door."

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Another way of stating the question is that if he had been consistent, as soon as Epicurus formulated his philosophy he should have retired to his cave and lived a

subsistence existence totally apart from the crowd. But he did not -- he lived a life of relative material luxury and devoted much of his time to philosophical controversy. Why - one naturally would ask? And I think the answer has to be in part that he valued the pleasures that he chose to pursue more highly - much more highly - than the pleasures he would have achieved had he retired to the cave on bread and water.

I'm not sure what you're getting at here. Epicurus talked the talk and walked the walk. He aimed to live the most pleasant life. Living an ascetic life in a cave open to the elements, alone, away from friends, on the edge of starvation, would not be pleasant. He knew that obviously. He set up shop right outside the walls of the city on the road to the Academy in relative affluence for the day. It has nothing to do with "higher" or "lower" pleasures. The life he led was the most pleasant for him and he chose that.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And I would say that what seems like the obvious answer to me is that he chose the pleasures derived from the life of philosophical study and writing and controversy as much more pleasant to him than the life of "grazing in the grass."

Epicurus chose "the pleasures derived from the life of philosophical study and writing" precisely because he found it pleasurable. He obviously enjoyed teaching, writing diatribes against rival schools, welcoming friends into the Garden. I don't think he weighed living like a cow or a pig AGAINST a life of teaching and writing. He knew what would bring him pleasure and pursued that.

Post by "Cassius" of October 10, 2021 at 11:29 AM

I don't think any of us are all that far apart, but I need to take a break before responding further to edit the latest podcast, and to get the video of Martin's presentation on propositional logic finalized, so I will use that break to reformulate my thoughts and return here as soon as I can.

Post by "Don" of October 10, 2021 at 2:07 PM

Just realized there are a lot of CAPITAL LETTERS in my post #94. I did not mean to yell that much 😊 Passions can get the best of you when you post later at night. I agree with everything

I wrote... Just maybe need to dial back the expression of it.

Post by “Cassius” of October 10, 2021 at 4:36 PM

Ha as you know I use capitals a lot as a shorthand for bold rather than to imply shouting. This software though has a very easy way to do both bold and italics and I need to break that habit myself!