

Collecting Ancient Instances of the Argument: "Pleasure Cannot Be The Highest Good Because It Has No Limit"

Post by "Cassius" of December 27, 2021 at 9:02 AM

If PD3 and much of Epicurus' discussion about "the limit of pleasure" (extending into the references to "absence of pain") is a response and refutation of earlier logical objections to viewing pleasure as the highest good, it would be expected that this argument should be found in a number of ancient writers. The purpose of this thread is to collect those instances and look for more, which will assist everyone in consideration of this issue. (Note: A recent example of this argument is [here](#).)

As a start we can find two very clear instances: the first and primary in Plato's [Philebus](#). We can also find the argument stated very clearly in Seneca, who of course post-dates Epicurus, but who would probably be the first to say that he did not claim originality, and that his own ideas reflected those of the earlier philosophers. Plus, Seneca formulates the argument with crystal clarity: "*The ability to increase is proof that a thing is imperfect.*"

I will list those two here in this post, and keep this first post up to date as others can find and suggest more. Please keep this question in mind and when you come across other instances of this argument in the future, please post them to this thread.

The argument that "pleasure is insatiable" is probably a subset and closely related to this same argument, so references to that argument would also be welcome in this thread. Simply stating that pleasure is insatiable does not give a complete argument, however, but I bet there are instances where that argument is made in more expansive form that would definitely be relevant here. A similar observation goes for the "purity" argument, in which smaller quantities of something that is pure are asserted to be superior to larger quantities of adulterated versions of the same thing.

I will update these with better hyperlinks but here are the two I have already collected in my "Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure" article:

1. Plato ([Philebus](#)) ([here](#) is a link to the following excerpt as found in Perseus - designated as 26b)
2. Seneca (Letters)

Plato's [Philebus](#):

Quote

[Here is an excerpt from Philebus as a finding aid to the full discussion](#) where the argument can be researched:

*SOCRATES: I omit ten thousand other things, such as beauty and health and strength, and the many beauties and high perfections of the soul: O my beautiful [Philebus](#), the goddess, methinks, seeing the universal wantonness and wickedness of all things, and that there was in them no **limit to pleasures** and self-indulgence, devised the limit of law and order, whereby, as you say, [Philebus](#), she torments, or as I maintain, delivers the soul. — What think you, Protarchus?*

*SOCRATES: **Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?***

[PHILEBUS](#): They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.

SOCRATES: Nor would pain, [Philebus](#), be perfectly evil. And therefore the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good. But now — admitting, if you like, that pleasure is of the nature of the infinite — in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and [Philebus](#), can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind? And let us be careful, for I think that the danger will be very serious if we err on this point.

[PHILEBUS](#): You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.

SOCRATES: And you, my friend, are also magnifying your favourite goddess; but still I must beg you to answer the question.

SOCRATES: And whence comes that soul, my dear Protarchus, unless the body of the universe, which contains elements like those in our bodies but in every way fairer, had also a soul? Can there be another source?

PROTARCHUS: Clearly, Socrates, that is the only source.

SOCRATES: Why, yes, Protarchus; for surely we cannot imagine that of the four classes, the finite, the infinite, the composition of the two, and the cause, the fourth, which enters into all things, giving to our bodies souls, and the art of self-management, and of healing disease, and operating in other ways to heal and organize, having too all the attributes of wisdom; — we cannot, I say, imagine that whereas the self-same elements exist, both in the entire heaven and in great provinces of the heaven, only fairer and

purser, this last should not also in that higher sphere have designed the noblest and fairest things?

PROTARCHUS: Such a supposition is quite unreasonable.

*SOCRATES: Then if this be denied, should we not be wise in adopting the other view and maintaining that there is in the universe a mighty infinite and **an adequate limit**, of which we have often spoken, as well as a presiding cause of no mean power, which orders and arranges years and seasons and months, and may be justly called wisdom and mind?*

... ... PROTARCHUS: Most justly.

Display More

Seneca:

Quote

Quote

*Seneca's Letters - Book I - Letter XVI: This also is a saying of Epicurus: **"If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich."** Nature's wants are slight; the demands of opinion are boundless. Suppose that the property of many millionaires is heaped up in your possession. Assume that fortune carries you far beyond the limits of a private income, decks you with gold, clothes you in purple, and brings you to such a degree of luxury and wealth that you can bury the earth under your marble floors; that you may not only possess, but tread upon, riches. Add statues, paintings, and whatever any art has devised for the luxury; you will only learn from such things to crave still greater. **Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping point. The false has no limits.***

Seneca's Letters - To Lucilius - 66.45: "What can be added to that which is perfect? Nothing otherwise that was not perfect to which something has been added. Nor can anything be added to virtue, either, for if anything can be added thereto, it must have contained a defect. Honour, also, permits of no addition; for it is honourable because of the very qualities which I have mentioned.[5] What then? Do you think that propriety, justice, lawfulness, do not also belong to the same type, and that they are kept within fixed limits? The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect." "THE ABILITY TO INCREASE IS PROOF THAT A THING IS IMPERFECT."

Quote

Please add your suggestions for other instances to this thread. I am sure that there are likely to be others out there, especially in Cicero and likely numerous Stoic references.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 27, 2021 at 5:21 PM

"Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping point. The false has no limits."

If Seneca is agreeing with Epicurus here (which it seems he sometimes did), then it seems in conflict with the conclusion in the 2nd quote: "The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect."

But why are "limits" a sign of imperfection? (That 2nd quote seems to be question-begging.) It can be recognition of the limit of a given pleasurable activity that keeps us from going over the tipping point, where it becomes painful (e.g., overeating). I might suggest that Nature has armed us as well as possible to enjoy a pleasurable/pleasant life of happy well-being. And that Epicurus got that right.

Sorry for wandering astray from the thread's request ...

Post by “Godfrey” of December 27, 2021 at 8:14 PM

As I interpret the argument, the theory was that if something is perfect then why would it increase? Sort of like adding an extra note or phrase to a musical composition can ruin the "perfect" composition. Hence the limit of pleasure as specified by Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of December 28, 2021 at 8:07 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But why are "limits" a sign of imperfection? (That 2nd quote seems to be question-begging.) It can be recognition of t

Right I think Godfrey has this correct. Though it may be counterintuitive at first glance, the Seneca/ Platonic argument is that a thing must have a limit to be perfect. - i.e. being the "best" is itself a limit, according to the argument.

And in case it's not clear, the argument is that pleasure can always be made better by adding more to it, thus it cannot ever reach the state of being "best."

Epicurus shows the fallacy of that argument. -- shows that pleasure indeed has a limit -- by pointing out that there are only two kinds of feelings, and as soon as ALL OF YOUR FEELINGS are pleasurable, you have hit that limit.

Over time I am coming to see that some people think this argument is so trite and abstract that they don't think the ancients could possibly have been consumed with its importance, so they dismiss this and go back to "Epicurus must be talking about a different kind of pleasure when he refers to absence of pain."

I think those people are wrong, and in failing to see how much importance Plato placed on it, they fail to accept that this is likely the entire reason for the absence of pain discussion.

We're it not for the need to refute Plato's argument Epicurus would never have had need for the absence of pain argument and he could have stopped with "Look at the newborn of all species" and "we perceive pleasure to be desirable just as we perceive honey is sweet and snow is white."

Post by "Godfrey" of December 28, 2021 at 11:27 AM

Cassius you've already mentioned this but The Greeks on Pleasure by Gosling and Taylor goes into quite a bit of detail on the discussion of pleasure in Plato and/or Aristotle (I can't remember if it's one or the other or both) as well as Epicurus' take on it. I'm just mentioning this to point out that the comparison of Platonic with Epicurean pleasure is a well developed line of research, although seldom mentioned elsewhere.

Post by "Cassius" of December 28, 2021 at 12:41 PM

You are indeed correct Godfrey. When I went back to check G&T on the "replenishment" theory I was overwhelmed (again) by the depth of the discussion.

G&T have exhaustively researched in great detail the full history of Greek philosophy's attitude toward pleasure, and their credentials are sterling, yet they are infrequently (at best) cited by the current crop of contemporary writers (no need to slam them by name - just check the list of cites in any of them for G&T and DeWitt.)

This is not accidental. It is G&T's thorough analysis of the issue that led then to first question the allegation that Epicurus emphasized the *katastematic* / kinetic distinction, which in turn led to [Nikolsky](#) tracking down the Carnaedes roots of that issue in DL.

I am afraid that the very depth of their research and soundness of their analysis is what has led them to being ignored - their conclusions do not fit the preferences of the "absence of pain" crowd, and the only response that crowd can take is to ignore their work. I would feel embarrassed for them but for the fact that they have no excuse for their error, given what G&T have tracked down.

Post by "Joshua" of December 29, 2021 at 4:34 PM

Quote

"The ability to increase is proof that a thing is imperfect."

In my recent reading of [Philebus](#), I found myself wondering why the interlocutors so readily agreed with Socrates on that point: why *is* it so necessary for the *telos* to be perfect, and admitting of no increase? It comes from the same school of thought that held that the Heroic past was Golden or, as we imply by its grammatical tense, "perfect". John Keats gave ironic expression to this idea in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, where he found the vessel's artistic engraving enchanting, *perfect* even, but lifeless in its perfection; so still was that still-life that it was still-born.

"Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!"

-John Keats

I suppose I struggle to agree with Epicurus on this point; all that mindless numb tranquility, all that confusion about pleasure and pain---we could have avoided the whole troubling mess!

But it's questions like these that keep me going back to the texts, though too infrequently.

Post by "Cassius" of December 29, 2021 at 5:04 PM

I think Joshua that this is a function of the seductiveness of "logic" -- kind of a Spock-like Vulcan quality.

Many of the ancient Greeks saw our "rationality" as our distinguishing feature as humans, and if that is our distinguishing feature we have to pursue "logic" to its ultimate conclusions.

And I think Epicurus saw that we're surrounded by people like that in philosophy, and if we're going to work with them - if we're going to trap them from the errors of their logic -- we have to point out those errors in a way that seems "logical" -- and I do think that is possible. It's not sufficient, but it's possible. I suspect if we had more Epicurus texts we'd have a lot more warnings about that, but we already have a good number, I think, that show that he was fighting against this kind of Platonic "logic" orientation -- made even far worse, and carried to far worse extremes, by the Stoics.

Post by "Don" of December 29, 2021 at 5:34 PM

I recently heard a science podcast (source amnesia for which one) that said, contrary to popular belief, humans are not rational creatures that feel emotions, we are emotional creatures that sometimes employ rationality. That doesn't do the episode justice, but I found that formulation intriguing.

Post by “Scott” of December 29, 2021 at 9:48 PM

Yesterday I was a bit frustrated by this topic/thread but I wasn't clear exactly **why**, though. Today I am happily relieved to see the new posts from Joshua, Cassius and Don.

In my head, I'm summarizing a few points/takeaways (about which I welcome comment):

1. Socrates (and Stoics and many other thinkers/philosophers - to varying degrees in fact, ALL of us) become entangled in language and logic, often using it sort of like math, and come up with rather impossible ideas and relationships (e.g. "the ultimate" "infinite" "perfection" "god"). These concepts have a disconnect with the "real" world we live in.
2. As a practical matter, Epicurus probably needed to give pleasure a "limit" in order to stave off Socratic type attacks. But at the end of the day, giving pleasure a limit probably creates as much trouble as saying it doesn't have one.
3. To me the claim "The ability to increase is proof that a thing is imperfect" seems like a classic example of an essentially meaningless statement. And you could easily argue forever with someone who claimed that was true, saying the exact **opposite** statement is true.

Post by “Joshua” of December 29, 2021 at 10:27 PM

Quote

As I interpret the argument, the theory was that if something is perfect then why would it increase? Sort of like adding an extra note or phrase to a musical composition can ruin the "perfect" composition. Hence the limit of pleasure as specified by Epicurus.

I wanted to flesh out my question more fully, particularly in light of what Godfrey has written here.

I can accept the basic argument that the hypothetically "perfect" can want (i.e. *lack*) nothing. What I cannot quite grasp is why an imperfect being (the human), arising from imperfect beginnings and employing imperfect means, must necessarily have as its aim something perfect. I think that Epicurus' solution to this Pythagorean/Platonic problem is a clever one, but at my current level of understanding I slightly wish that he had cut down that argument instead of trying to supply an adequate solution.

Nevertheless, I'm quite happy to acknowledge that this *was* actually the course he chose to take. Now I'm trying to better understand why he chose to take it. Since it recurs in almost all of the core texts, he must have felt that it was important.

I suspect that the answer has something to do with his conception of the gods; in paraphrase, 'they do not trouble us because their perfect happiness prevents them from wanting or needing to trouble us'.

Although here too, I confess that I am somewhat wistful about yet another missed chance...

Come to think of it, almost all of the parts of Epicurean Philosophy that are controversial even among Epicureans, from tranquility to his view of the size of the sun, hinge on these two premises of perfection and limitation. 🤔

Am I overstating that case? (Probably! 😞)

Post by “Don” of December 29, 2021 at 11:09 PM

First, Epicurus's "limit" or "boundary stone" of pleasure seems eminently practical to me. If your mental and physical being is completely imbued with pleasure, by definition, you are feeling no pain. If you are feeling as much pleasure as possible with no hint of pain, there's no way that could be increased. You could feel different kinds of pleasure at that point, but you can't feel "more" pleasure if you're experiencing an absolute lack of any pain. This could be complete relaxation and calm or some other kind of all-encompassing pleasurable experience.

Now, that being said, I don't think that's *humanly* possible: to experience that limit of pleasure. Diogenes Laertius provides commentary on this (X.121): "Two sorts of happiness (eudaimonia) can be conceived: (A) the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented; the other (B) admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures." Only the gods can experience happiness that cannot be ἐπίτασιν "augmented" or "increased in intensity or force." The pleasures of the rest of us can be προσθήκην καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν "added/supplemented and taken away/removed." (These two words are the opposite of each other, i.e., plus and minus.) Theoretically, humans could enjoy the happiness/pleasure/good that cannot be increased. Theoretically. But as a practical matter, that's going to be difficult. However, that goal is maybe what is provided by the idea of a god (or maybe the sage, the sophos): "And never, neither awake nor in sleep, throw yourself into confusion, and you will live as a god among humans; because no person who lives among eternal pleasures is like a mortal being." (End of the letter to Menoikeus)

All that being said, I think pleasure is sometimes conflated with desire in those dialogues and these discussions. Full disclosure: I have not read [Philebus](#). On my list, not read yet. From what I have read, it seems this conflation may be part of the problem. A *desire* for wealth or fame can never be satisfied. There's always more money to get. There's always more fame to acquire. Somebody on Earth will have money you don't have and somebody won't know who you are. That's why those *desires* are empty/vain/κενός. Now, the *pleasure* you get from getting a taste of fulfilling those *desires* is real and good. But those *desires* lead to frustration and so they are not to be recommended.

Finally, pleasure is the telos because it is what everything else points to. Why do we act virtuously? Because we feel pleasure when doing it. Some do it because they like to be seen acting virtuously. They take pleasure in being seen acting virtuously. Virtue is a means to an end, the end, which is pleasure. "Why do we feel pleasure?" seems to me to be a nonsensical question. That's how nature evolved us! I know this argument doesn't/didn't convince everyone, but it seems patently obvious to me. Pleasure is the telos not because it's "perfect." It's the telos because it's what everything else works towards. In the game of life personified as Old MacDonald's Farm, pleasure is the cheese. It stands alone. Okay, not the best metaphor but we'll leave it there.

Post by “Scott” of December 30, 2021 at 1:30 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

If you are feeling as much pleasure as possible with no hint of pain, there's no way that could be increased.

I don't understand: using the expression "as much pleasure as possible" sounds like begging the question, but even if allowed, it seems to me one could have for example just completed a great meal and feel pleasantly full and have no bodily or mental pains, and be comfortable in a Lazy Boy chair and yada yada, IOW be just as content and full of pleasure as one could be - yet - if a favorite song comes on, or one's best friend whom was away for several months surprises and walks in, or any myriad of other pleasant things would suddenly occur, one's pleasure would increase, no? If those things happened to me, I feel certain I would experience an increase of pleasure. What am I missing here?

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2021 at 7:30 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2293-collecting-ancient-instances-of-the-argument-pleasure-cannot-be-the-highest-good/>

I put "thanks" instead of thumbs up on some of these because I glad to see this discussion. Here are some responses:

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

What I cannot quite grasp is why an imperfect being (the human), arising from imperfect beginnings and employing imperfect means, must necessarily have as its aim something perfect.

I have a very important but somewhat tongue-in-cheek answer: "Because you are a MAN!" And you're not just ANY man, you're a Greek, you're a Roman, and you would be ashamed to be satisfied by setting a goal for yourself of ANYTHING BUT THE BEST! How dare you even SUGGEST that we use our lives to pursue anything but the best??

I see this as much the same message as those "Be All You Can Be" advertisements the Marines used to use. And in fact I truly see no problem with that attitude, even - or especially - as an Epicurean. We of all people take the position that we only have one life to live - no second chances, no reincarnation, no heaven after death. So for me, that has always been one of the most compelling observations of the philosophy: when you know your life is short and over for an eternity thereafter, how can you accept wasting a second of that time in failing to identify and pursue whatever is BEST? Now that probably wasn't the attitude of a lot of Epicurus' Athenian contemporaries -- there was probably a lot of simple "human pride" mixed in. But I do think that the "Why not be the best you can be?" attitude is sound reasoning, and in order to answer that question, the inquiring mind has to ask "Well, ok - What is the best I can be?"

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

but at my current level of understanding I slightly wish that he had cut down that argument instead of trying to supply an adequate solution.

I am afraid that the "cutting down" led in fact to part of our problem today. I firmly think that the Letter to Menoeceus, and the PD's, are both truncated and "outline-level" versions of Epicurus' full position. If we had more of the texts I feel certain that what we are discussing now (the view that the absence of pain limit is a response to this logical argument) would have been made amply clear. In fact I think that in the atmosphere of the philosophic schools of Athens everyone would have been taught that Platonic argument at the beginning stages of their learning about philosophy, and Epicurus and his contemporaries never considered or thought to deal with the possibility that this Platonic logical argument would fail from view, or that any of their future students would (like Don and me too until recently 😊) would fail to have read [Philebus](#) and be aware that it is necessary to deal with it. Surely we aren't the first to ask, and they in fact did ask: "Why did Protarchus and [Philebus](#) agree to back off and abandon their view

that Pleasure is the highest good? Could they not have been better arguers? What should they have said?

And I think what we are discussing now is "What [Philebus](#) and Protarchus should have said to shut up Socrates."

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

Now I'm trying to better understand why he chose to take it. Since it recurs in almost all of the core texts, he must have felt that it was important.

Yes, not only important but essential given the knowledge of his students of the Platonic arguments, as discussed above.

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

I suspect that the answer has something to do with his conception of the gods; in paraphrase, 'they do not trouble us because their perfect happiness prevents them from wanting or needing to trouble us'.

See, I would not go in that direction except only to this limited extent: I think that the anticipations of the gods -- our ability to project the nature of their existence and what these "best" beings would be doing with their lives --- I think that aspect of human nature, that inborn faculty to look for "the best" -- is a large part of the driving force that compels us to deal with Socrates' question. It's our anticipations that lead us to recognize that there are such things as "better" and "worse" that we then devote our studies and our conceptual reasoning to in order to figure it out.

if we didn't have something within us that drives us to be "the best" then we might well be content to live in a cave on bread and water and air so long as our experience was filled with bread and water and air. But something drives us to "do better" than that form of existence.

[Quote from Don](#)

First, Epicurus's "limit" or "boundary stone" of pleasure seems eminently practical to me. If your mental and physical being is completely imbued with pleasure, by definition, you are feeling no pain. If you are feeling as much pleasure as possible with no hint of pain, there's no way that could be increased. You could feel different kinds of pleasure at that point, but you can't feel "more" pleasure if you're experiencing an absolute lack of any pain. This could be complete relaxation and calm or some other kind of all-encompassing pleasurable experience.

Yes - I agree with all of that EXCEPT the implication of the last sentence. When you're at the limit because your experience is completely filled with experiences you find pleasurable, then you're at the limit and there's nothing else you can experience - by definition. I would say tranquility is not BEYOND or IN ADDITION to that limit, but is part of the bundle of pleasures that you are experiencing that have taken you up to that limit -- but beyond that point you cannot conceptually proceed.

[Quote from Scott](#)

- if a favorite song comes on, or one's best friend whom was away for several months surprises and walks in, or any myriad of other pleasant things would suddenly occur, one's pleasure would increase, no? If those things happened to me, I feel certain I would experience an increase of pleasure. What am I missing here?

I think you're still not grasping the full significance of what Socrates is arguing. He is saying:

A life that's full of pleasure, but which can be made better by more pleasant things, is obviously not the best life you can conceptually achieve. The best life you can conceptually achieve cannot be improved. Socrates is accepting your premise, Scott, and using it to argue against you. Because Socrates is saying (in the full argument in [Philebus](#)) and elsewhere, that if more pleasure can always be added to your life, then you must recognize that "more pleasure" cannot logically be set as your goal -- you will always want more. And if you will always want more, Socrates will tell you, then you need to ask yourself "how do i know what else, what more kinds of pleasure, that I need?"

And Socrates will tell you "That Scott, is the function of WISDOM, and PRUDENCE and KNOWLEDGE." And if you admit that, as did [Philebus](#)/Protarchus, then you are quickly impelled to the conclusion that it is not correct to set PLEASURE as your goal -- No, the correct goal is in fact WISDOM/PRUDENCE/KNOWLEDGE!!!

And thus, Scott, Socrates would say to you, you must now join our fellow Platonists and Stoics on the road to search for WISDOM (and the other virtues) which you have admitted to be more important than pleasure!

Post by "Don" of December 30, 2021 at 8:04 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

I feel certain I would experience an increase of pleasure. What am I missing here?

That's because you're a human being living in the material world:

Quote from Diogenes Laertius

"Two sorts of happiness (eudaimonia) can be conceived: (A) the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented; the other (B) admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures."

That scenario you play out sounds great! 😊 If you could make choices to achieve such a day, that would be a pleasureable day. The gods - completely filled with blissful happiness and confident in its incorruptible continuation - experience Happiness A. I think the goal of the mortal is to see that kind of happiness *as a goal* and to make choices and rejections that can get the arc of our lives as close to that as possible. To live the most pleasureable life possible. That's why I'm drawn to Sedley's "idealist" position on the gods. I won't go into details here, but that makes more "sense" to me than beings living between universes.

To continue, even Epicurus couldn't escape pain and was in excruciating pain near his death, but he was happy, filled with all the pleasure he could muster, embracing an appreciation for all the pleasures he had experienced in his life, surrounded by friends who cared about him, and imagining the continuation of his dream of the Garden (whether or not he would see it).

That's my take on your question. Others may have different responses.

Keep the questions coming! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2021 at 9:59 AM

Very good post by Don there. The quote from Diogenes Laertius is very helpful, but probably fits in the category of having subtle implications that need further explanation.

I think it's generally a bad idea to try to dig out too much meaning in words that may not have been intended to be so precise, but here I would say:

The "can be conceived" is crucial. He's not saying "Epicurus held that there are two types of pleasure, one better than the other. I would argue he is continuing the same context of the debate with Plato. It is possible to "conceive" - to "conceptualize" two types of pleasure. One of those cannot be increased, which the gods experience, or which we can conceive "by definition," and the other being the kind that we ordinary mortals can experience, a continual flow of a mix of pleasures and pains in which pleasures can be experienced to go up and down

with experience.

I say this because I can easily hear the "Tranquilists" saying -- DL is saying that Epicurus held that there are two types of pleasure, one experienced by the gods, and that's better than the ordinary kind, and what he's referring to is "Tranquility!"

I can easily hear that being argued, and I think that needs to be swatted down with all the intensity that can be mustered. The goal is "Pleasure" - not "the pleasure of the gods" or "tranquility" or anything else.

Post by “Don” of December 30, 2021 at 10:44 AM

Thanks, [Cassius](#). You also raise some good points.

- Note that it's eudaimonia (let's use well-being as an inadequate translation) not pleasure that the excerpt is describing.
- There's no value judgment, just an observation. "We can imagine 2 types of eudaimonia..."
- It's also an important observation from that excerpt that our eudaimonia is *composed* of pleasures. The pleasure that comprises the gods' eudaimonia cannot be increased. They're filled up. For us mortals, pleasureS can be added or subtracted to the eudaimonia of us mortals... But we can work toward the fully immersive total pleasure of the gods.

PS I think it's important to point out that eudaimonia is just what we call a pleasurable life. It's a description of what happens as we experience the pleasures in life.

Quote from Epicurus

Neither must one who is young delay in loving and pursuing wisdom; nor should one who is old grow weary of loving and pursuing wisdom; because it is neither out of season nor untimely for the health of the psychē. And one who says either the season to love and practice wisdom is not yet arrived or the season has passed by is like someone who is saying either the proper time has not arrived or is no more for eudaimonia. Therefore, both the young and old must love and pursue wisdom. On the one hand, the old can be young by means of gratitude for the pleasures which have happened; on the other hand, the young can be as if they are old in years by means of the fearlessness of facing what is intended to be done or what is to come. You must study and meditate upon that which produces eudaimonia. For if indeed that is present, we have everything; if that is not present, we do anything to have it.

I'd paraphrase by saying "You must study and meditate upon how to experience pleasure (i.e., that which produces eudaimonia). If pleasure is present, we have everything. If pleasure is not present, we do anything to experience it."

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 30, 2021 at 1:50 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I think it's important to point out that eudaimonia is just what we call a pleasurable life. It's a description of what happens as we experience the pleasures in life.

A pleasureable and happy life is the telos for me. It is a combination of removing mental pain and increasing mental pleasure. Pleasureable sensations are both "medicine" and the "icing on the cake of life".

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We're it not for the need to refute Plato's argument Epicurus would never have had need for the absence of pain argument and he could have stopped with "Look at the newborn of all species" and "we perceive pleasure to be desirable just as we perceive honey is sweet and snow is white."

The newborn naturally functions on the pleasure-pain principle, but as adults we need to add the wisdom of hedonic calculus, which is based on learning and memory.

For modern times, perhaps we will need to raise our game. And that means: 1) getting clear what Epicurus said, and 2) adapting the philosophy to modern times.

But as I am still newly learning, I am very dependent on everyone's insights that are presented, so I thank you.

Post by “Scott” of December 30, 2021 at 1:53 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

I can accept the basic argument that the hypothetically "perfect" can want (i.e. lack) nothing.

Does everyone accept this? I'm not convinced of it yet. One could for instance argue that something hypothetically perfect must have NO limits, NO limitations. Having a limit means lacking the capacity to be infinite. The argument that the "best" means there is nothing beyond could therefore be "incorrect". A Christian might say that God is infinite. That He has no limits or limitations. He does not lack anything precisely because he is unlimited ...eh?

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2021 at 3:02 PM

[Quote from Scott](#)

One could for instance argue that something hypothetically perfect must have NO limits, NO limitations.

And yes that takes you to Christian / monotheistic omnipotence and omniscience.

And that's why the Epicurean physics is so important: if you learn the basics at the beginning as Epicurus intended, and understand the critical importance of consistency, then you realize the folly in pursuing hypotheticals that have (and can have, given your physics positions) no existence in fact. This is one of the areas that Don and I and others have talked about in terms of resisting abstract hypotheticals, and why it's recorded that Epicurus himself was averse to them.

We can imagine anything we want, and we can make hypothetical systems that are consistent within themselves, yet which have no foundation in the real world observable to our senses.

You should keep after this argument Scott until you've satisfied yourself with it, because it's one of the core arguments that will forever separate Epicurus from the world of religion and abstract logic -- and will forever make those opposing schools the mortal enemy of Epicurus.

We as Epicureans may appear to be riding safely on a wave of secularism in recent decades and centuries, but the issues are much deeper than Epicurus against Judeo-Christianity -- it's also Epicurus against the misuse of abstract logical speculation.