

Pleasures of the soul, Values, Meaningful Life

Post by "Matteng" of June 18, 2022 at 5:45 PM

Hello,

For the context: I've moved from the stoic camp to the epicurean and I am learning the Epicurean principles.

In metaphysics and epistemology the Epicurean have in my opinion the better and more realistic approach.

Now I dive more into the ethics.

In ethics I wonder if Pleasure involves personal values besides the "pure bodily" pleasures.

(There is a citation which says: Beside the pleasures of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching... I would not know any pleasure)

But I think I get it wrong.

Where are personal values in the Epicurean pleasure concept if they are there ?

Because I see virtue as a means to fulfill these values which give me pleasure (maybe that's the answer, a wide interpretation of pleasure ?)

Beside the pure sense-pleasures, I value for example that:

-I am not addicted to something/someone

-value friends/family, progress in society,

-have compassion for humans and animals

-love to learn new things and philosophy (like Epicurus), learning about nature, value/ like to improve abilities.

Are that "pleasures of the soul" ?

Or are these values part of "virtue" ? That virtue gives pleasure ?

Post by "Don" of June 18, 2022 at 7:11 PM

Welcome to the Garden, [Matteng](#) 😊

I'll try and address a couple of your questions:

[Quote from Matteng](#)

if Pleasure involves personal values besides the "pure bodily" pleasures.

Pleasure includes both pleasure felt in the body and pleasure felt in the mind, although that's a little misleading in that all pleasure in some sense is both in the mind and body. We need both a body and mind too experience pleasure.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

I see virtue as a means to fulfill these values which give me pleasure (maybe that's the answer, a wide interpretation of pleasure ?)

The virtues (ex. justice, morality, courage, etc.) are *only* means to leading a pleasurable life. They have no value - other than that - in and of themselves. There is no such thing as "virtue for virtue's sake" in Epicurus's philosophy. The virtues do not fulfill any other purpose than as a means to a pleasurable life.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

- I am not addicted to something/someone
- value friends/family, progress in society,
- have compassion for humans and animals
- love to learn new things and philosophy (like Epicurus), learning about nature, value/like to improve abilities

If those activities provide you a sense of pleasure, that's one track then. Preface each of them with "I take pleasure in..." and see how that sounds to you.

I'll stop there and see what others may add.

Post by "Cassius" of June 18, 2022 at 7:53 PM

I agree with Don, and I think you are completely on the right track, and it is maddening that the major philosophies have made this question the slightest bit difficult.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

In ethics I wonder if Pleasure involves personal values besides the "pure bodily" pleasures

Absolutely yes. Do those actions you describe being you pleasure in performing them or even thinking about them? Then absolutely yes, to you they are pleasures. Epicurus says (per Torquatus) that the pleasures of the mind can be and are often more significant than those purely of the body (but remember Don's caveat, without the body you are nothing,so all pleasures are in that sense "of the body")

[Quote from Matteng](#)

(maybe thats the answer, a wide interpratation of pleasure ?)

Yes! And the interpretation is as wide as can be imagined. If something brings you a feeling OF ANY KIND then the feeling is ultimately pleasurable or painful. All human mental and physical activities fall in one of these two categories, no matter how much the abstractionists want to protest that their virtues are higher than pleasure.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Are that "pleasures of the soul" ?

I would definitely say yes. The point to keep in mind is that there is no supernatural soul, so everything "mental" is of the soul, or spiritual, or intellectual, or whatever you choose to label that mental functioning of the body.

And glad to have you posting! These are common questions lots of people have and always good to talk about them!

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 19, 2022 at 10:38 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

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Are that "pleasures of the soul" ?

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[Quote from Cassius](#)

If something brings you a feeling OF ANY KIND then the feeling is ultimately pleasurable or painful. All human mental and physical activities fall in one of these two categories, no matter how much the abstractionists want to protest that their virtues are higher than pleasure.

Good questions Matteng. And both Don and Cassius, I am enjoying reading your replies, and I'd like to throw in this into the mix:

From the Letter to Menoecus:

"Third, keep in mind that some desires are natural whereas others are groundless [[note](#)]; that among the natural desires some are natural and necessary whereas others are merely natural; and that among the necessary desires some are necessary for happiness, some for physical health [[note](#)], and some for life itself."

To illustrate what is unnecessary: This morning I was offered a chocolate covered cream filled donut (because my sister bought an entire box yesterday). Yet I have been slowly gaining weight (and I do not want to go out and buy new bigger pants). So I am choosing to reduce my sugar intake. I acknowledged my desire when I said "yes, those do look good" and then, acknowledged the recognition that the donut was unnecessary when I said: "but no thank you" as I had already in mind to choose to eat unsweetened oatmeal with some strawberries. I made this choice for the sake of physical health. Good health is both a pleasure and a value.

What is unnecessary is that which is either not needed for long-term enjoyment/happiness and/or that which brings pain as a long-term result.

It up to each person to make wise choices about what for themselves is "necessary vs unnecessary" and we might each make different choices depending on our circumstances. There are some PDs which do point out important pleasures, such as [PD27](#) --"Of all the things that wisdom provides for the complete happiness of one's entire life, by far the greatest is friendship."

And I would say friendship is both a pleasure and a value. It brings both physical and mental joy. And Letter to Menoecus ends with: "So practice these and similar things day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend..."

Post by "Matteng" of June 19, 2022 at 4:37 PM

Thank you for your responses.

It's a pleasure to find a active forum like this 😊

I think this point of values in Epicurean philosophy should be emphasized.

Because the prejudice in stoic communities goes like this:

Stoic: Hero who embraces every problem / challenge.

Epicurean: avoiding pain like a weak coward.

In reality the Epicurean decides what engagement is worth it and takes the emotions as short/fast information and the stoics often devalue and detach from things that they have no impact on them.

Yes when I value nothing in life, then I have no fear/grief to lose something and desire nothing, but then I've already lost everything and am like a dead machine.

I know that this could even be an prejudice against the stoic philosophy because with "indifferent" they mean moral indifference but it's a probability/tendency for devaluation.

See Epictetus doctrine of "no grief for a lost son".

But ok this doctrine was a summary from one of his pupil and has maybe another meaning like (giving back to fate/nature).

Or like in Christianity when someone was lost, he/she is in "heaven" or a "better place". But that would imply other things (why then not going direct to the "better place".)

Post by "Cassius" of June 19, 2022 at 4:48 PM

I agree again with your post Matteng, especially as to the practical effect of Stoicism. The ancient Stoics were more consistent in detaching themselves to the point of a death-like state, and although the modern Stoics try to separate themselves from that, they can't successfully do it, and thus among the modern Stoics there is this uneasy feeling - whether acknowledged or not - that there is something wrong at the root of their philosophy.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Stoic: Hero who embraces every problem / challenge.

Epicurean: avoiding pain like a weak coward.

And indeed as you would expect I think the descriptions are very accurate, but the labels are reversed! It is Epicurus who was the great conqueror of fear and the biggest challenges of them all, "and by his victory we reach the stars."

Space exploration, in fact, is for Epicureans, who seek pleasure from knowledge and new frontiers. Consistent Stoics would rather sit home and contemplate why the universe does not conform to their own preconceived notions of "virtue."

Post by "Don" of June 19, 2022 at 7:29 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Stoic: Hero who embraces every problem / challenge.

And why do they embrace every problem or challenge?

Because it gives them pleasure to do so (not that they would admit it, of course)

Post by "Cassius" of June 19, 2022 at 9:23 PM

Yes I think Don's answer applies in most cases in the last comment. But I am not sure it is a good idea for us to take the "everyone pursues pleasure whether they admit it or not" too far. Some people do seem to choose pain for the sake of pain, under the influence of warped thinking. EG - "I am a worm and I deserved to be squashed by God."

I suppose you can reduce that to "It gives him pleasure to think that" but in some cases it seems to me we would be straining too hard to argue that point.

In the end humans have some degree of intelligence and the free will to use it, so I think it's best at some point in some extreme cases to just let them wallow in their stupidity and agree with them:. "Yes sir I accept that you are serious about your framework. You are a bug in the sight of your lord and you deserve to be squashed. Go to it sir but please leave me out of it!"

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 20, 2022 at 9:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes I think Don's answer applies in most cases in the last comment. But I am not sure it is a good idea for us to take the "everyone pursues pleasure whether they admit it or not" too far. Some people do seem to choose pain for the sake of pain, under the influence of warped thinking. EG - "I am a worm and I deserved to be squashed by God."

Not sure about the "worm deserving to be squashed" -- that sounds like someone who feels "guilty for their sins", which in my book is whole other issue coming out of Christianity.

There is the saying: "No pain, no gain":

From Wikipedia:

"No pain, no gain (or **"No gain without pain"**) is a proverb, used since the 1980s as an exercise motto that promises greater value rewards for the price of hard and even painful work. Under this conception competitive professionals, such as athletes and artists, are required to endure pain (physical suffering) and stress (mental/emotional suffering) to achieve professional excellence. Medical experts agree that the proverb is wrong for exercise."

And then from a mental side: "no growth without pain" and the belief that achieving success requires pain. This could occasionally be true. But what kind of success is this for anyway?

"cutthroat marketing" or generating the highest profits, not for pleasure but for big money.

And this is all about an either/or -- either pleasure or pain -- which is incorrect because it leaves out the option of engaging in pleasureable exercise -- or pleasureable work which isn't focused on high profit.

Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of June 25, 2022 at 9:30 AM

Hey [Matteng](#)

Just my two cents with what I wish I had learned earlier in my journey into Epicurean Philosophy, in which I'm still a beginner:

1.- There is a hedonic calculus, hedonistic calculus, hedonistic calculation, whatever you want to call it, that you can see as actually exercising your free will and choosing pleasures now instead of later, or pains now for pleasure later; you'll be doing this, consciously or unconsciously **once you recognize that pleasure is the end/goal of our beings**; this last sentence is key, and was the hardest part for me to see, as I put many filters from other philosophies before it, before realizing how simple it is; I find Epicurus philosophy is quite simple, regardless of how complicated it may seem, or may be made to seem. Incidentally, this hedonistic calculus, in my interpretation, is the swerve in action. The little tiny place where we at every moment can exercise free will, in a universe that is otherwise highly deterministic (I'm not say everything is determined, but Epicurus himself recognized that the atoms behave "mechanically", but for the little tiny swerve).

2. For the nature of the soul, and understanding how everything comes down to the body as it's been said before in this thread, and to arm yourself a bit better against superstition and mirages usually proposed by religious organizations, look for Thomas Cooper. There's this post about him: [Thomas Cooper MD](#)

3. Understanding the natural limit of pleasure. This is for the sake of dispelling any concerns or stresses or pains you may encounter about having to EXPERIENCE THE MOST PLEASURABLE LIFE ALL THE TIME, and producing pain for yourself by creating tension against the moments where the deterministic part of our existence will put us in painful positions that we will have to endure regardless; this mis understanding can put us in a track farther away from pleasure, because we would not be actually seeking pleasure, but an *ideal thus non-existing* accumulation of pleasure. **The natural limit of pleasure is the elimination of pain**, and this is important because of the following (that I can see at least but, again, I'm a beginner):

A. When in doubt, focus on eliminating pains, this IS OK, and it's the first type of pleasure. When you eliminate pain, you ARE EXPERIENCING PLEASURE. For most of us, our senses have been attuned to not even sense this, because of how good things are that we're able to spend time philosophizing in the internet. But this is the first pleasure available, and we can use reason to realize it. As I understand it, this is the katastematic pleasure of Epicurus, the one that "only those who are willing will experience", and the one that offended Cicero as he didn't think there were things humbler people could learn that he couldn't, but then again, he didn't seem to want to.

B. After eliminating pain, all pleasures beyond this limit, are embellishments. Embellishment pleasures are great! Try to experience as most as you can (carefully calculating not to produce more pain for you down the line). Let these guide your life if you want even, but keep in mind the following point.

C. The limit of pleasure has been met. All of these embellishments don't add up more pleasure to your life. You won't experience them after you're dead, and you certainly won't take any memories of them to an afterlife. The maximum natural quantity of pleasure has been obtained when you eliminated all the pain, so if you want to stay at that, IT'S OK! If you want to go for more embellishments, IT'S OK! Just be weary of the slippery slope of wanting more of something that won't add more pleasure and may become a source of much pain.

I post this with modesty.

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2022 at 10:23 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

Incidentally, this hedonistic calculus, in my interpretation, is the swerve in action.

Yes IMHO you are doing a good job of describing it. The only real problem with the term "hedonistic" calculus is that it's not a label the Epicureans accepted or used, so far as I can tell, and the term is today more associated with a Cyreniac "pleasure of the moment" attitude. When you're debating a term like "hedonistic calculus" that isn't originated or trademarked by Epicurus it's easy to get confused. Epicurus taught a full "worldview" philosophy and the real secret of Epicurean philosophy is not so much stacking up pleasures against pain, which most anyone can do to some degree, but gaining an understanding of the universe that allows you to "intelligently" stack up those pleasures against those pains, and more accurately and successfully obtain a better result in the process.

[Quote from camotero](#)

A. When in doubt, focus on eliminating pains, this IS OK, and it's the first type of pleasure

I suspect that it is literally true that in most cases when you don't know what to do next, jumping out of the frying pan without worrying too much about the direction you're jumping is a good idea.

But along with the comment above, the real heart of Epicurean philosophy comes from understanding the full situation you as a human are in through applied physics and epistemology and ethics. Maybe as reflected in the first part of your sentence, when you have grasped such a worldview you have significantly decreased the range of "doubts" that you should be experiencing, and you should have a much better idea of how to proceed toward pleasure. If you DON'T do that, then you will be as Epicurus describes - you will have studied and observed phenomena but not understood anything, and in fact you might even be in a worse position than before, because now you have 100s more questions but no scheme of understanding through which to approach them.

And as Epicurus himself says, sometimes you WILL choose pains, as you indicated Camotero, so you must have an understanding of where you are in order to decide whether a particular pain SHOULD be eliminated immediately, and how. The Frying pan might be hot, but if that frying pan is suspending you over the grand canyon you might be well advised to stay in the frying pan til you've figured out a way to arrange a soft landing.

Not trying to be nit-picky here but I hope you see the general point is the big one you've done a good job of addressing in your post. The quantity of absence of pain may equal pleasure quantitatively, but qualitatively and contextually things are always unique and nothing is ever fully at rest, and PLEASURE is the word that Epicurus always comes back to as the guide. So when possible, even when confronting pains, it might often be a better course to "wait" and gain a better understanding of the full picture before blindly attacking the pains of the moment without an overall strategy.

Post by “Don” of June 25, 2022 at 10:48 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the term is today more associated with a Cyreniac "pleasure of the moment" attitude.

The phrase itself is inextricably linked to Bentham and Utilitarianism. While [Cassius](#) is correct that neither Epicurus nor the Epicureans used the specific phrase "hedonic calculus," he did - all the time - use "choice and rejection" ἄρᾶσιν καὶ φυγῆν. So, in some ways, one is always weighing pain and pleasure and choosing and rejecting. That is, generally speaking, a kind of "calculus." Just don't get overly hung up on the term 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The Frying pan might be hot, but if that frying pan is suspending you over the grand canyon you might be well advised to stay in the frying pan til you've figured out a way to arrange a soft landing.

😊 Good wordsmithing there. Vivid metaphor 👍

I think you're generally on the right track, [Mathitis Kipouros](#) . Thanks for sharing this.

Post by “Cassius” of June 25, 2022 at 11:59 AM

Yes it's not the "calculus" part that causes the problem, it's the association of the term in full as Don said.

Post by “beasain” of June 27, 2022 at 6:17 AM

Although I am a beginner, I dare to bring up a practical example from [Peter Adamson's History of Philosophy](#):

"An Epicurian takes a plane and is offered a seat in Business Class, although he has an Economy ticket. He will accept it as there is no pain in exchange, because it is more pleasant to travel in Business Class, like more space and better food. He could think that next time he has to travel in Economy Class he might desire to be in Business, but as a good Epicurian he can deal with that, as it is not a necessity."

Peter Adamson use the term ascetic hedonism for Epicurism. What do you think of that?

Post by “beasain” of June 27, 2022 at 6:41 AM

[Matteng](#), what I also like about Epicurism is that it seems to take also animals in consideration (and better informed people will help me with this), and that animals also seek pleasure, apart that it considers all humans equal (which is revolutionary in Antiquity). Animals are not like most salon biologists put it trying to be the fittest in the evolutionary race, but they have in general very humanlike emotions and behaviours, and play and enjoy (when there is space for that). This is not wishful thinking but has been demonstrated in studies with apes and monkeys and everybody can enjoy the joy of animals around him (see e.g. numerous studies of [Frans De Waal](#), Jane Goodall, etc.). I think that from an ethological point of view, and I consider humans and other animals equals in this, the idea that the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain is the universal motor of animal behaviour is really a very valuable one. And I think that this is not yet appreciated enough. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 27, 2022 at 7:17 AM

[Quote from beasain](#)

Peter Adamson use the term ascetic hedonism for Epicurism. What do you think of that?

I think that label and also the example are clearly *not* what Epicurus taught.

The example makes clear (at least as you have stated it) that he would accept the business class ticket only if there is " *no pain in exchange*" with the emphasis there on the "no" for our purposes of discussion.

While there are definitely statements which can be taken out of context would result in that 'ascetic' viewpoint, in my view if you take all the texts as a whole that a very different conclusion is compelled. To the contrary of asceticism, the goal is pleasure as that term is ordinarily understood, in which joy and delight and "active" pleasures are among the most enjoyable (what is most pleasant to a person is personal and contextual), and as a result we willingly embrace pain on a regular basis in exchange for pleasures that we deem to be much greater than the pains we incur as the cost of those pleasures.

Letter to Menoecus:

"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.

...

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

Although the same statement is not made in the PD's explicitly, we have [PD08](#), which states the first part, and by implication the converse is also true and could be stated - "no pain is an evil thing in itself, but some pains bring with them pleasures many times greater than the pains."

[PD08](#). No pleasure is a bad thing in itself; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.

And very clearly in Torquatus (On Ends):

Nor again is there any one who loves or pursues or wishes to win pain on its own account, merely because it is pain, but rather because circumstances sometimes occur which compel him to seek some great pleasure at the cost of exertion and pain.

So based on these and many other statements that can be retrieved from the texts there is no reason whatsoever to take the position that "ALL PAINS ARE TO BE AVOIDED ALL THE TIME" which is the logical implication of any form of "Ascetic" approach to Epicurus.

Avoidance of all pain as the goal of life is simply not what Epicurus taught. He taught the pursuit of pleasure as the goal of human life, which entails the expected and even at times desirable acceptance of pain for purposes of achieving pleasure.

One last cite:

Usener 423: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

Post by "beasain" of June 27, 2022 at 8:25 AM

@Cassius, I think my plane example needs a bit more explanation. First of all my rendering maybe a bit confusing, but I don't see this problem. When they offer you an upgrade in this situation, there is only pleasure, and no pain. So for an Epicurean this is great. Nobody is saying that you have to avoid by all means pain.

On the other side, it is clear to me that Epicurus warns against indulgence. He doesn't need champagne, he is happy with water and seems to recommend a frugal life.

[Diogenes Laertius:](#)

"Epicurus himself says in his letters that he was content with nothing but water and a bit of bread.

'Send me,' he says, 'some preserved cheese, that when I like I may have a feast.' Such was the man who taught that the end is pleasure."

Also here in the same text:

"Sexual intercourse, they say, has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him. Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the Problems and in the work On Nature. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life. He will feel shame in the presence of some persons, and certainly will not insult them in his cups, so Epicurus says in the Symposium. Nor will he take part in public life, as he says in the first book On Lives. Nor will he act the tyrant, or live like the Cynics, as he writes in the second book On Lives. Nor will he beg. Moreover, even if he is deprived of his eyesight, he will not end his whole life, as he says in the same work."

So, I imagine me Epicurus as a modest man seeking most pleasure in very natural simple things and not as a big spender with big needs. From there to "ascetic" is not that far away, I think.

In defence of Peter Adamsom, I have to say that he places Epicurus in a historic context, where hedonism was seen as coward-ism, and had a very negative press, and he wanted to stress the frugality and not seeking immediate pleasure but stable pleasure (moving pleasure vs stable pleasure) in contrast with the Cyrenaics, who seek immediate pleasure. Epicurus has been commonly misunderstood as an advocate of the rampant pursuit of pleasure, he, in fact, maintained that a person can only be happy and free from suffering by living wisely, soberly, and morally.

So this justifies the use of "ascetic" (pleasure), I understand. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of June 27, 2022 at 9:05 AM

[Quote from beasain](#)

Nobody is saying that you have to avoid by all means pain.

Beasain I am glad to see that *you* are not saying that, but in my reading of many people over a good number of years of studying Epicurus, I observe that there are many people who in fact DO say that. And to take the example you gave as literally written, "no pain" means "no pain." I don't mean to sound overly technical here as to the meaning of words, but it is exactly this issue which is in dispute. There are those, and this is entailed in the word "ascetic" who do in fact hold out "absence of pain" as a complete and full description of the highest good.

You'll recall that is exactly what [Hieronymus of Rhodes](#) advocated, and I see it in the wording of

What is it, then, that you ask? I will tell you, said I, and that for the sake of learning rather than of finding fault with either you or Epicurus. I too, said he, should be more desirous to learn of you, if you can impart anything worth learning, than to find fault with you.

Well, then, said I, you are aware of what [Hieronymus](#)¹ of Rhodes says is the chief good, to which he thinks that everything ought to be referred? I know, said he, that he thinks that the great end is freedom from pain. Well, what are his sentiments respecting pleasure? He affirms, he replied, that it is not to be sought for its own sake; for he thinks that rejoicing is one thing, and being free from pain another.

[Quote from beasain](#)

From there to "ascetic" is not that far away, I think.

I think if we are being precise in our wording, "ascetic" is as far away from "Epicurean" as North is from South, or East from West.

I realize that playing with definitions is largely a word game, and the subtleties of meaning vary widely and can be interpreted differently very easily by many people.

But I also think that it is possible to "generalize" about what a word means to "most people," and that in common discussion words carry meaning that is not strictly technical in philosophical discourse.

And EpicureanFriends is not targeted at professional academic philosophers, but "regular people." And I think it is fair to say that the "regular people" who we generally come into contact with interpret the word 'ascetic' to mean something that is incompatible with pursuit of any kind of mental or physical pleasure.

If we redefine "ascetic" to mean some kind of generic "rigorousness" in applying the calculation of "always pursuing the greatest pleasure as the ultimate goal" then that word would be fine. But virtually no one interprets it that way.

[Cambridge Dictionary:](#)

ascetic
adjective us
/ə'set.ɪk/ uk
/ə'set.ɪk/

[avoiding physical pleasures](#) and [living a simple life](#), often for [religious reasons](#): They [live](#) a very ascetic [life](#).

Definition of ascetic

1 : practicing strict [self-denial](#) as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline an ascetic monk an ascetic diet 2 : [austere](#) in appearance, manner, or attitude

ascetic

[uh-set-ik]

See synonyms for: [ascetic](#) / [ascetics](#) on Thesaurus.com

noun

a person who dedicates his or her life to a pursuit of contemplative ideals and practices extreme self-denial or self-mortification for religious reasons.

a person who leads an austere simple life, especially one who abstains from the normal pleasures of life or denies himself or herself material satisfaction.

(in the early Christian church) a monk; [hermit](#).

adjective Also as·cet·i·cal. relating to [asceticism](#), the doctrine that one can reach a high spiritual state through the practice of extreme self-denial or self-mortification.

rigorously abstinent; [austere](#): an ascetic existence.

exceedingly strict or severe in religious exercises or self-mortification.

So again Beasain let me repeat that I am not aiming this dispute at you personally. I think your interpretation you are stating is very compatible with what I read Epicurus as saying.

But for purposes of keeping the overall situation always in view, I think we need to recognize that considering Epicurean views to be related to ascetic views or practices in any way is a very

dangerous thing to do, maybe not for the person (like yourself) who keeps the distinction firmly in view, but because in dealing with others we can never be sure that they will understand that subtlety.

That's why I take every opportunity like this to hit home the point. You yourself probably don't need it, but I wager that the majority of casual browsers who come across this discussion and read it need to be reminded of it (or, sadly, have it pointed out to them for the first time!)

Post by “beasain” of June 27, 2022 at 9:26 AM

OK [Cassius](#), I understand your point and your worries. Thank you for answering my question in debt.

Post by “Cassius” of June 27, 2022 at 12:30 PM

I always enjoy discussing this issue because I think it is so important.

I find that there are basically two camps:

Camp One - People who focus on the "absence of pain" passages and conclude that "avoid all pain to the extent possible" is the supreme guide of Epicurean philosophy, without regard to the pleasure that is thereby forgone.

Camp Two:. People who focus on "pleasure" as that term is ordinarily understood, embracing all forms of mental and physical enjoyment, and who conclude that the correct statement of the primary guide is that pleasure is the focus and is to be pursued so long as we ourselves deem the resulting feeling of pleasure to be worth the cost in pain needed to obtain it.

Everyone has different tolerances for pain, and different valuations of pleasure, so it's really impossible to make the generic statement of Camp Two more precise than that. There is no absolute set of pleasures always to pursue or pains always to avoid.

The error of camp one, in my view, arises from attempting to conclude that all pain is so intolerable that it must be avoided at all costs.

I wish camp one was a straw man and that no one seriously advocates for that, but we are talking philosophy here and we need to be as precise and clear as possible with our

formulations.

Camp One is the short path to Stoicism and Buddhism IMHO and is therefore to be avoided at all cost. Camp One is sustainable in Epicurean terms only by ignoring large parts of the surviving texts. The Camp Two position can explain and apply ALL the texts appropriately, but the Camp One position cannot be reconciled with the many explicit endorsements of choosing pain at times for the sake of pleasure. Camp One attempts to rely on "ataraxia" as the "greatest pleasure," to support it's position, but that too (IMHO) cannot stand the test of scrutiny when compared against the full system. Ataraxia can easily be incorporated into Camp Two's big picture, but Camp Two cannot embrace Pleasure without stretching reasonable constructions of definitions beyond the breaking point.

Post by "Cassius" of June 27, 2022 at 1:00 PM

I have failed to reference the first text that should always come to mind whenever asceticism is discussed: Vatican Saying 63:

[VS63](#). Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess.

Post by "Cassius" of June 27, 2022 at 1:14 PM

One more contextual issue that I think is underappreciated but very important is the issue of time. All things being equal, if we had plenty of time, then it makes more sense to defer action when some amount of pain is required. In the big picture, however, life is very short, and for an eternity we are nothing after we die. In my mind that is a factor that compels us to be very serious about how we make this calculation, and to realize that some pain is required in virtually everything we do in life.

As Horace said, seize the day. Or, make hay while the Sun shines.

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 27, 2022 at 3:44 PM

[Quote from camotero](#)

B. After eliminating pain, all pleasures beyond this limit, are embellishments. Embellishment pleasures are great! Try to experience as most as you can (carefully calculating not to produce more pain for you down the line). Let these guide your life if you want even, but keep in mind the following point.

C. The limit of pleasure has been met. All of these embellishments don't add up more pleasure to your life. You won't experience them after you're dead, and you certainly won't take any memories of them to an afterlife. The maximum natural quantity of pleasure has been obtained when you eliminated all the pain, so if you want to stay at that, IT'S OK! If you want to go for more embellishments, IT'S OK! Just be wary of the slippery slope of wanting more of something that won't add more pleasure and may become a source of much pain.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I find that there are basically two camps:

Camp One - People who focus on the "absence of pain" passages and conclude that "avoid all pain to the extent possible" is the supreme guide of Epicurean philosophy, without regard to the pleasure that is thereby forgone.

Camp Two:. People who focus on "pleasure" as that term is ordinarily understood, embracing all forms of mental and physical enjoyment, and who conclude that the correct statement of the primary guide is that pleasure is the focus and is to be pursued so long as we ourselves deem the resulting feeling of pleasure to be worth the cost in pain needed to obtain it.

Everyone has different tolerances for pain, and different valuations of pleasure, so it's really impossible to make the generic statement of Camp Two more precise than that. There is no absolute set of pleasures always to pursue or pains always to avoid.

I would like to propose that friendship is a pleasure which every Epicurean should cultivate.

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

VS 52: Friendship dances around the world, announcing to each of us that we must awaken to happiness.

In our modern world when we are all so short on time it might seem that friendship is an embellishment, but I would say that friendship is not an embellishment. One certainly could live as a hermit free from pain, but would be much lacking in the joy that comes with engaging and spending time with a good friend or friends. And it must be cultivated -- finding good friends, making time, and also behaving in an enjoyable way toward each other -- choosing enjoyable things to talk about, finding humor and fun and sharing fun activities. The feelings of friendship are far deeper and surpass the simple enjoyments of food, music, etc. of the simple physical sensations.

Post by “Cassius” of June 27, 2022 at 3:54 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I would like to propose that friendship is a pleasure which every Epicurean should cultivate.

Even at risk of forever disqualifying yourself from the world of Modern Stoicism????

Genuine friendship—as Aristotle for example thought of it—is *not* something that the reserved Stoic can allow herself. This element is clearly expressed in Seneca's writings: here, friendship is never of substantial value because the Stoic should be capable of living easily without the friend and she should be capable of making friends with any human being (Seneca, *Letter IX*). The Stoic is non-social in this sense that she will never dare to invest herself emotionally in another person. For her, by rational consideration with regards to her own virtue and the shared reason of every human, every individual is fundamentally the same to her.

(From ModernStoicism.com)

Or even worse (in terms of numbers of people) separating yourself from the Buddhist viewpoint (which implies not getting too attached to any one person)?

Gosh, somebody willing to do that better be ready to tread the path less trod !

But then Lucretius said (according to Humphries):

Exploring ways where none have gone before,

Across the Muses' realms I make my way,

Happy to come to virgin springs, to drink
Their freshness, to discover all the flowers
No man has ever seen, and of them twine
Myself a garland, which no poet yet
Has had from any Muse. This I deserve
Because I teach great things, because I strive
To free the spirit, give the mind release
From the constrictions of religious fear,
Because I write clear verse about dark things,
Enduing what I touch with grace and charm;
And this makes sense, for, just as doctors do,
When they give bitter wormwood to a child,
But first take pains to smear the rim of the cup
With the sweet golden honey, and to fool
The unsuspecting patient, anyway
As far as the lips, till he gulps down the dose
Of bitter wormwood, fooled, but not betrayed,
But rather given health and strength, so I,
Harsh as my system may appear to those
Who have not used it (and, in general,
People shrink back, set lips and minds against it)
Nevertheless, for your sake, Memmius,
Have wanted to explain the way things are
Turning the taste of honey into sound
As musical, as golden, so that I

May hold your mind with poetry, while you
Are learning all about that form, that pattern,
And see its usefulness.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 27, 2022 at 4:13 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Even at risk of forever disqualifying yourself from the world of Modern Stoicism????

Yes 😊

The Stoics would say that Epicureans are only friends for purposes of utility, but that isn't true.

VS 23: Every friendship is an excellence in itself, even though it begins in mutual advantage.

Clearly in friendship there is also a risk of pain, in if your friend moves away or dies you will feel the pain of the loss of that friendship. But I see the "Epicurean Garden" is a place of many friends. So then that would be a consolation, as one is surrounded by more than just one friend.

Post by “Cassius” of June 27, 2022 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Clearly in friendship there is also a risk of pain, in if your friend moves away or dies you will feel the pain of the loss of that friendship

Another excellent example why the "Avoid Pain At Any Cost" Approach is TERRIBLY unEpicurean!

Frances Wright agreed in her [Chapter 10 of A Few Days In Athens](#):

Quote

But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible, we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey.

Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good? Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption. What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be

slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 27, 2022 at 5:54 PM

[beasain](#), [Mathitis Kipouros](#), and [Cassius](#) -- I am now re-reading these threads a bit more closely and am seeing that it might be good to construct some kind of a table or graphic which might show that actually there is evidence in Epicurean teachings for both a "just enough pleasure" and a "full cup of pleasure". All of this has come up before and it really would be good to have it all layed out clearly. Seeing it in a table or graphic form could also make it easier for when future questions arise. Also, a table might have several different columns to compare and contrast, and give evidence for or against.

Post by “Don” of June 27, 2022 at 11:22 PM

I realize I'm late to the game here, but...

The idea that Epicurus was an ascetic and ordered an ascetic lifestyle for his students seems to stem from two primary sources: the idea of the “necessary and natural” desires, and the mention of “bread and water” in the Letter to Menoikeus.

As for the latter, I've stated in other places (including my translation of the letter), I am convinced that Epicurus was using “maza and water” because that was the everyday meal of the regular ancient Greeks. Epicurus is referencing the meal you have every day and don't even pay attention to and contrasting that with the extravagant table laden with fish and other delicacies. He's urging us to pay attention to the meal that's in front of us. We don't have to shun luxuries should they come up every once in a while, but we have all we need right here in front of us if we pay attention to it.

The natural and necessary desires are never singled out as the ONLY desires to pursue or fulfill, although he says that's all we *need* should that befall us. We aren't commanded to only pursue those... and there is some question in my mind what those “necessary and natural’ ones

are since he's a little circumspect in the letter to Menoikeus 127-128 (see below). Most of these, to me, encourage us to pay attention to our needs and desires; not necessarily what to choose. Everyone has to make those decisions for themselves.

[VS63](#) is a good one to bring up. Bailey's commentary on that one is LXIII is interesting as showing that Epicurus did not wish to push his idea of the simple life to excess: the ascetic will suffer bodily distress like the glutton and so fail to attain aponia.

Menoikeus 127-128:

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

[PD29](#) Among desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural and unnecessary, and some are unnatural and unnecessary (arising instead from groundless opinion). (Scholion on [PD29](#): Epicurus regards as natural and necessary desires which bring relief from pain, as e.g. drink when we are thirsty ; while by natural and not necessary he means those which merely diversify the pleasure without removing the pain, as e.g. costly viands ; by the neither natural nor necessary he means desires for crowns and the erection of statues in one's honour.)

Seneca, Letter 9.20 (quoting Epicurus): "Si cui," inquit, "sua non videntur amplissima, licet totius mundi dominus sit, tamen miser est." "He says: "Whoever does not regard what he has as most ample wealth, is unhappy, though he be master of the whole world."

Seneca, Letter 14: Now you are stretching forth your hand for the daily gift. Golden indeed will be the gift with which I shall load you; and, inasmuch as we have mentioned gold, let me tell you how its use and enjoyment may bring you greater pleasure. "He who needs riches least, enjoys riches most." "Author's name, please!" you say. Now, to show you how generous I am, it is my intent to praise the dicta of other schools. The phrase belongs to Epicurus, or Metrodorus, or some one of that particular thinking-shop.

Post by "Cassius" of June 28, 2022 at 6:08 AM

Thank you Don - I noticed you were scarce yesterday so I am glad you came back around for this one.

The target is the life of pleasure, and yes, it makes a lot of sense that staying "within one's means" is generally a very good idea, and it's something of course I try to do myself too. But in doing so it's essential to remember the goal at all times, and to never get carried away with this or any other "technique" as is the technique in itself is the goal.

That lesson never gets old and seems to need constant repeating in virtually every aspect of life.

Post by "Don" of June 28, 2022 at 7:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thank you Don - I noticed you were scarce yesterday so I am glad you came back around for this one.



It's nice to be missed...