

The Difference Between Happiness and Pleasure

Post by "brett" of January 13, 2018 at 5:45 PM

hi all,

Been following the FB thread today and it got me thinking about the difference between happiness and pleasure.

I generally take happiness to be a state of absence of mental disturbance and the presence of contentment or pleasure. I generally take pleasure to be a positive feeling in body or mind. One can be happy without being in a state of bodily pleasure, but not without some sort of mental pleasure. Not sure that jives with an epicurean understanding of pleasure and/or happiness.

Curious the thoughts of others.

Best

Brett

Post by "Cassius" of January 13, 2018 at 6:05 PM

I want to hear from others too but I think what you wrote jives very well with what I understand of Epicurus. We have this model on happiness from [Epicurus' final day / letter to Idomeneus](#):

"On this blissful day, [I think I see this translated happy regularly, but would have to find cites] which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus."

So Epicurus could say even while in great bodily pain that he was blissful (happy), because his mental pleasure outweighed his bodily pleasure. That is exactly what you are saying, as I read it.

As to this sentence: "I generally take happiness to be a state of absence of mental disturbance and the presence of contentment or pleasure" I probably would not say that "absence of mental disturbance is required." As I see it every moment of life is a sliding scale of some combination

of pleasurable things and painful things, and it's never really possible to totally eliminated the "painful" things, if you consider everything that requires exertion to be "painful." What you're describing as absence of pain and absence of disturbance while enjoying nothing but pleasure is the definition of the goal of living, but that's not the same as saying that that goal is reachable for everyone, or reachable at every moment. What you can say is that pleasure is alone what makes like worth living, and as long as you have some pleasure, especially combined with the prospect of more pleasure in the future, then life is worth living.

I want to hear others too.

Post by “brett” of January 13, 2018 at 6:09 PM

YES! Well said. I was just reading the full cup post. Looking forward to other's thoughts also.

Thanks

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2018 at 6:55 PM

That "[Full cup](#)" page at [NewEpicurean](#) has IMO a tremendous amount of good material cited, but I've never developed it as it needs in terms of a narrative and argument. It's a huge issue and deserves a book and/or years of work on it and nothing else, especially digging into the material that is available through Gosling & Taylor's *Greeks on Pleasure*. [Boris Nikolsky's article "Epicurus On Pleasure"](#) is also an important stepping stone, and he does the professional job of building up the argument that the supposed kinetic/katestematic division is not really Epicurean. So much more remains to be done on that.

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2018 at 7:01 PM

And Brett thank you for taking the time to put this thread in a perfect location in the forum! 😊

Post by “brett” of January 13, 2018 at 7:43 PM

Let's say I have a 1974 VW Super Beetle that I LOVE to work on (All true). I tore the engine apart to the last bolt last summer. It was a PAIN IN THE BUTT. I tore up my knuckles, made some costly mistakes, and swore a lot. But in the end, I had SO MUCH fun and enjoyment working with my friend to get it back together, running like a top, and even boosted it to a record shattering 80 horsepower!...:-)

It seems to me that Epicurus would applaud my work on this car as contributing to my happiness. Sure, I had my fair amount of pain, but it was very pleasurable to do.

If I had, however, dipped into my 401k, emptied my savings, or took food off the table for my family, this joyful enterprise could have been just the opposite. In that case, it would have been a pleasure with a significant mixture of present and future pain. What I found enjoyable would have contributed to significant future pain for me and my loved ones.

Sure, I didn't NEED to undertake this enterprise, certainly not a necessary or really natural need, but it was something that i loved doing and added pleasure to my life.

Brett

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2018 at 8:13 PM

Absolutely! Brett have you read the [extended narrative by Torquatus in support of Epicurus in Cicero's ON ENDS](#)? You may not have got to that yet. This point is explained there, and of course in [Epicurus' letter to Menoecus](#):

Torquatus:

“On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue. Equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. **But in certain circumstances and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection:**

he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains."

And of course the letter to Menoeceus:

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.

Your calculation tradeoff is exactly right IMO.

Also as to "Sure, I didn't NEED to undertake this enterprise, certainly not a necessary or really natural need, but it was something that i loved doing and added pleasure to my life.."

That is the other question I find myself often debating on the forum, the meaning of "natural and necessary." That also is addressed in Torquatus, but people still argue that the rule is that ONLY necessary desires (which by definition would be natural) should be pursued.

I think your answer is absolutely the correct one, and that's my position, but this is like "absence of pain" that you have to look at the big picture and not "autisticly" apply a passage out of context. I argue the good evidence comes from the fact that passages that discuss natural and necessary never explicitly say necessary only, and they never list any examples (if Epicurus had said "drink water and eat bread only!" that would defeat our point, but he never said that). Further in the letter to Menoeceus Epicurus explicitly explained that the point of living simply is to be independent, and that luxury can be ok if we aren't dependent on it. We also have Torquatus saying:

"Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of pleasure and of the principles of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the Telos, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live agreeably."

And:

“Here is indeed a royal road to happiness -- open, simple, and direct! For clearly man can have no greater good than complete freedom from pain and sorrow coupled with the enjoyment of the highest bodily and mental pleasures. --- NOTE THE "COUPLED" -- he is saying that the two are different, and that simply stating "absence of pain" does not define the other completely

And there are many other arguments.... but even with these I think the position you are taking is clearly the correct one.

Post by “brett” of January 13, 2018 at 8:39 PM

Excellent! That makes SO much sense to me.

one last addition: while all of what I said is true of my current situation, in the future my financial circumstances could change and that very same situation could contribute to pain for me if I chose to undertake it even though I couldn't afford it, or it was my only mode of transportation, etc. There's certainly a relativity to the status of events as contributing to or depriving me of pleasure.

Thanks for following me down this path. It's helping me get a firmer grasp on Epicureanism.

Brett

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2018 at 9:02 PM

Exactly Brett. THAT is why there are no hard and fast examples listed in the text. In many cases, what at one moment is a desirable choice is at the next moment deadly, and that is as it has to be since there is no master supernatural force coordinating events., and events are constantly changing.

When I was in school I was under the spell of Cicero's personal Platonic-inspired viewpoints, and back then i first ran into a well known passage in Cicero's "Republic" about [TRUE LAW](#): (link to my post on this)

“True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging

and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrong-doing by its prohibitions. And it does not lay its commands or prohibitions upon good men in vain, although neither have any effect on the wicked. It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal a part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by Senate or People, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. **And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times,** and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for He is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst penalties, even if he escapes what is commonly called punishment .” . .” — Marcus Tullius Cicero, Republic, The Laws, 59 – 47 B.C.

I used to swear by this passage, and now I see it is ****completely wrong.**** 😊

That's why the PD's on Justice read as they do - there is no ONE SIZE FITS ALL set of ethical standards that are higher than the practical guidance of pleasure and pain under the circumstances then and there existing. People don't seem to talk much about those last 10 PDs and I think that is why.

People are nowadays (some of them anyway) used to the idea that in questions of personal discretion and morality that decisions have to be evaluated by circumstances. But that applies not only to whether you like vanilla vs chocolate, and whether the first scoop is good and the 200th at one sitting kills you, it applies to every question of justice and social organization as well. That's a tough thing to accept, but Epicurus followed it through to the conclusion that is logical.

Everyone has their pet political and moral issues, and I do too, but for purposes of promoting Epicurean philosophy I think it's necessary to see that there's no "one size fits all" in any of these questions other than that each person is programmed by nature to make their own calculation of pleasure and pain, and we all have to realize that and act accordingly.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2018 at 8:19 AM

This is what I posted to the Facebook page:

Don't accept ambiguities and "nothing but words" as the definition of Pleasure. "Pleasure" isn't a word game, but a wide term that includes all the mental and physical experiences we all feel

it includes. Here is Epicurus stating that exact point: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men what would be the remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures [pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses], unless they meant to give us nothing but words. I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above."

These are reliable quotes directly from Epicurus himself, according to Cicero, as recorded in Tusculan Disputations. Check for yourself the full text here: <http://www.archive.org/stream/cu31924...arch/translator>

Here is a text version of the wider passage from [Cicero's Tusculan Disputations](#):

[Addressed to Epicurus]: This is what you say in that book which contains all the doctrine of your school; for I will perform on this occasion the office of a translator, lest any one should imagine that I am inventing anything. Thus you speak: "Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good, for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men what would be the remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words. I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above." What follows is much the same, and his whole book on the chief good everywhere abounds with the same opinions

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2018 at 9:12 AM

I think we ought also be careful not to conclude that 'agreeable motion' or "smooth motion" (a popular alternate translation) is simply a reference to "dancing," as sometimes is implied. The

Latin text from Perseus is clear and unmysterious - "suavis motionis." Given that from birth to death we as a whole and our individual components of mind and body are constantly in motion (even when we sleep or appear to be at rest) I suggest it's likely that "smooth motion" is a wide term that could also encompass all our mental and physical experiences. As such, "smooth motion" gives us insight into the use of words implying "tranquility" and "absence of disturbance." We're never really at rest; we're always experiencing pleasures and pains, what we want is for those experiences to be experienced "smoothly." Nothing mysterious or anti-feeling or anti-emotion in any of this; in fact just the opposite: clear, ordinary, understandable feelings of pleasure experienced deeply and smoothly.

[41] Quid tergiversamur, Epicure, nec fatemur eam nos dicere voluptatem, quam tu idem, cum os perfricuisti, soles dicere? sunt haec tua verba necne? in eo quidem libro, qui continet1 omnem disciplinam tuam,—fungar enim iam interpretis munere, ne quis me putet fingere—dicit haec: “nec equidem habeo, quod intellegam bonum illud, detrahens eas voluptates quae sapore percipiuntur, detrahens eas quae rebus percipiuntur veneriis, detrahens2 eas quae auditu e3 cantibus, detrahens eas etiam quae ex formis percipiuntur oculis4 suavis motiones, sive quae aliae voluptates in toto homine gignuntur quolibet5 sensu. nec vero ita dici potest, mentis laetitiam solam esse in bonis. laetantem enim mentem ita novi: spe eorum omnium, quae supra dixi, fore6 ut natura is7 potiens dolore careat.”

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3Asection%3D41>

Post by “Hiram” of January 14, 2018 at 10:25 AM

This is a very ancient discussion. I wrote on it when discussing the first Cyrenaics:

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2016/07/10/cyr...us-the-younger/>

"Lampe thinks that Cyrenaics are eudaimonics (believed in happiness as the end, not just pleasure), but most scholars disagree. It's likely that a variety of views existed within the school regarding the end. One of the key arguments for hedonism (i.e. pleasure as the end) in its inception had to do with how pleasure is not the same thing as happiness. Pleasure is an instance, happiness is a collection of pleasures, and as such happiness is therefore an abstraction, a platonized alternative to the real experience of pleasure. This argument is interesting, and still generates debate and various opinions today."

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2018 at 10:39 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/283-the-difference-between-happiness-and-pleasure/>

That is a GREAT sentence: *Pleasure is an instance, happiness is a collection of pleasures, and as such happiness is therefore an abstraction, a platonized alternative to the real experience of pleasure.*

That's exactly why all this causes so much debate - there are 1000 different definitions of happiness, but pleasure needs no explanation.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2018 at 10:40 AM

Hiram I looked at your page - is that a QUOTE from Lampe, or your summary. If a quote would be good to keep this for regular use.

And if not a quote, STILL good for regular use! 😊

Post by “Hiram” of January 14, 2018 at 10:47 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Hiram I looked at your page - is that a QUOTE from Lampe, or your summary. If a quote would be good to keep this for regular use.

And if not a quote, STILL good for regular use! 😊

It's a quote of myself in the book review.

Lampe has many VERY good direct quotes, though, and his book can help us to train people in techniques that are specifically used to maximize pleasure. Things like Cyrenaic "presentism" (they trained their followers to be in the present, not only to resist otherworldly fancy but also to enjoy the moment, and this idea of philosophizing with our feet on the ground is an important one that we haven't capitalized enough), and a Cyrenaic virtue of adaptability which implies putting "**less faith in his ability to control what happens in the future than in his ability to adapt to it**".

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2023 at 7:57 PM

I think i will add to this old thread to extend the conversation on the distinctions between:

- 1 - "Happiness" as a concept to be defined in words.
- 2 - "Happy" as a mental feeling.
- 3 - "Pleasure" as a concept to be defined in words
- 4 - "Pleasure" as a feeling

Someone called to my attention this illustration from Diogenes Laertius which might be useful as a means of illustration:

Quote

Even on the rack the wise man is happy. He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed. When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans.

I would say that that is a use of "happy" as a concept. The wise man on the rack may be able to summon up a pleasurable feeling from a good memory of the past as a part of his overall experience, but the overwhelming immediate bodily and mental feelings are almost surely going to be mostly painful, so that he gives rise to cries and moans. This would be an instance in which (if the quote is accurate) Epicurus is using "happy" as a "concept" standing perhaps in the place of some abstract sum or description of the man's total life experiences, but not as a present-moment desirable and conscious state.

That's all well and good and highly useful in conceptual debate, However in more immediate and practical terms, we have many instances where "happiness" or "happy" does not seem to be the word of choice to describe the ultimate objective, but "pleasure":

- Diogenes of Oinoanda - "If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end."

- Torquatus: This being so, it is plain that all right and praiseworthy action has the life of pleasure for its aim. Now inasmuch as the climax or goal or limit of things good (which the Greeks term telos) is that object which is not a means to the attainment of any thing else, while all other things are a means to its attainment, we must allow that the climax of things good is to live agreeably.

- Torquatus - If then a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure is the ultimate good.

- Torquatus - If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure.

- Lucretius - "Dia voluptus, dux vitae"

This may be more relevant to [another thread currently underway](#), but I also want to put this here as a means of crosslinking the discussions.

I am thinking the take-home point is that BOTH perspectives are valid, but that we must be careful and clear how we are using these words and in what context they are being used. Otherwise we easily make the mistake that Diogenes of Oinoanda is shouting against: that of putting some abstraction (in which "happiness" becomes like "virtue") in place of real-world practical experience by which to guide our lives.

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2023 at 9:06 PM

Rather than edit let me restate something from the last post. Not "both" but -

ALL FOUR of the perspectives that I listed in the start of post 16 can be perfectly valid and useful, depending on the context of the discussion.

What I see as a big problem is that "normal people" want to be given a definition so they can know exactly what to do. If we tell them that the goal is "happiness" (or flourishing or eudaemonia or some esoteric or fancy-sounding type of pleasure) then they will inevitably ask: "What does 'happiness' mean? And that's the rub - there is no good way to exhaustively define what it means to be happy to all people all the time. It looks like the Epicureans thought that the best way to define happiness is "a life of pleasure" but that doesn't satisfy someone who is

looking for an elaborate definition.

So people who ask that question have to come to understand that what they are looking for does not exist in a Platonic ideal conceptual form. There is no single definition that applies to everyone of what it means to be "happy" other than "a life of pleasure" -- and they themselves are the only judge of what pleasure feels like to them.

I have to think that a lot of the difficulty in discussions of Epicurus' views comes from failure to explain that "happiness" as a concept does not have a single precise definition. And if we try to skate around the issue by substituting other high-sounding words - if we don't make clear that "happiness" means nothing more conceptually than "a life of pleasure" - then we are back on the slippery slope to Platonic idealism.

Post by “Don” of January 27, 2023 at 9:39 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

have to think that a lot of the difficulty in discussions of Epicurus' views comes from failure to explain that "happiness" as a concept does not have a single precise definition.

The only general definition I'd offer is...

happiness (or eudaimonia or well-being...) is a life filled with necessary desires, taking pleasure in the everyday joys available too us, and fulfilling "extravagant" desires to create memorable moments ready at hand to be remembered, as well as a life free of worry and anxiety, with only the occasional pain to be endured, leading to a pleasurable life with friends by one's side.

Post by “Cassius” of January 27, 2023 at 9:40 PM

Yes, that's a lot more words, but all of them keyed directly to pleasure. The further we get from "pleasure" the more the danger lurks, I think.