

"Absence Of Pain Is Pleasure" - How Would You Articulate That To Someone?

Post by "Eoghan Gardiner" of November 15, 2023 at 9:32 AM

This seems to me one of the key points on this forum lately and helps clear up a lot of issues with neo-epicureanism. So how would you explain that to someone?

Experientially I have discovered this to be true but I don't think I could explain it in a good way.

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 9:57 AM

Here's a start. I will expand on this but I want to go ahead and add an explanation that Joshua just found in the Aulus Gellius material:

It is a perfectly acceptable construction in grammar, used by numerous people but no less than Virgil and Homer, to express one of a pair of opposite terms by stating its negation. For example, when Homer wanted to describe a virtuous person, he would call him "without fault." When Virgil was describing a horrible person, he described him as "without praiseworthiness." We could go on and on to expand this list, but these are among the examples that Aulus Gellius cites as perfectly acceptable and clear language, and we are all familiar with similar usages.

Aulus Gellius then goes on to include Epicurus' use of "absence of pain" as an example of the same kind of grammatical construction. This shows that Epicurus' usage is not intended to be mysterious, but to be a normal construction when discussing opposites.

Epicurus can describe pleasure as "absence of pain" because he holds that pleasure is the opposite of pain, and that all feelings resolve into one of the two, so that if you are feeling anything at all you are feeling either pleasure or pain but not both at one part of your body or mind, and not "neither" -- there is no neutral state. The universe is made up of atoms and void and nothing else, and all feelings are either pleasure or pain and nothing else. So "absence of pain = pleasure" and "absence of pleasure = pain."

Expressing feelings by using negations emphasizes that the worst pain is the total absence of pleasure, and the best pleasure is the total absence of pain. Further, use of the negation helps emphasize that we are not concerned with describing an exact experience of pleasure or an exact experience of pain. We aren't concerned about doing that because it can't be done,

because there is nothing common between all pleasures except that we feel them to be agreeable, and there is nothing in common between all pains except that they feel disagreeable.

Expressing pleasure in such sweeping terms was important to Epicurus because he wanted to emphasize that "pleasure" is not limited to "stimulative" experiences, but that pleasure also includes all normal and healthy mental and bodily experiences of life. There's no way to express those in greater detail without providing an innumerable list of experiences, or without simply calling them experiences in which pain is absent, or "absence of pain."

And using DeWitt's words, this extension of the name of pleasure to the normal state of life is the key insight:

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. *The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.*"

The only way that Epicurean philosophy makes sense is to see "Absence of Pain" as synonymous with "pleasure," and "Absence of pleasure" as synonymous with "pain." If you try to divorce the two and make absence of pain something different from, and higher than, pleasure, then you tear the heart out of the insight that pleasure includes both pleasures that are stimulating and pleasures that are part of normal daily healthy life, and you lose the trail to see that "pleasure" is the term to use to describe the alpha and omega of life.

For those who are into the details, I would say that this is why examining closely Torquatus' response to the Chrysippus' hand argument is so important. The normal hand in a normal state without pain IS in a state of pleasure, and if you state that anything is "without pain" then you are stating that it's at 100% pleasure. This is also the way to understand why the pain-free host pouring wine for the thirsty but otherwise pain-free guest are both experiencing the same level of pleasure - "pain-free" is "pain-free." And it's why Torquatus is so adamant in insisting to Cicero that "pleasure" and "absence of pain" are the same.

Quote

Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be." ... Cicero: Still, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment),

surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible." Cicero - "On Ends" Book 2:iii:9 and 2:iii:11 (Rackham)

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 10:11 AM

[Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

Experientially I have discovered this to be true but I don't think I could explain it in a good way.

Interestingly I am not sure that I would agree that "absence of pain = pleasure" can be "discovered to be true experientially" -- at least not fully.

Everything we are doing here in this discussion is defining terms and attempting to attach words to feelings. The only way to be confident that "Absence of pain" equals "pleasure" is to assign in your mind the meanings of these terms and then hold them firmly. Cicero's objection that "absence of pain is not equal to pleasure" is a perfectly reasonable assertion to many people, and it isn't met fully by saying "your definition is erroneous." Who gets to set what the "right" definition is?

That's why I think this statement is hugely important: "The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing."

The "ought" in that sentence then has to be explained, and it's going to ultimately be a matter of your ultimate views of the universe. If life is a privilege and a short-term gift to be treasured, then we will see it as a pleasure. If life is a prison and a burden and a torture by the gods, then we'll see life as a pain.

I suppose yes you can introspect and learn to see that life IS really a pleasure, but in the end I think you end up needing to add the philosophical viewpoint to reach the ultimate understanding. As Lucretius says (paraphrasing) it's not the light of day that opens our eyes to these things, but a scheme of philosophic contemplation.

Also:

[PD12](#). A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that, without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed.

[PD19](#). Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure.

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

[PD21](#). He who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want, and makes the whole of life complete, is easy to obtain, so that there is no need of actions which involve competition.

Post by “Bryan” of November 15, 2023 at 10:39 AM

Physical contentment is achieved frequently and naturally by the internal process in our bodies when we have the necessary accommodations of food, shelter, and security.

Mental contentment is achieved just as naturally and frequently, by realizing the ease of obtaining physical contentment and fostering gratitude for our success in doing so.

Failing to appreciate this fact, most people, even when in a painless state, often try to add to their pleasure – from here most perils of their lives arise.

Metrodorus is quoted by Plutarch as "This very thing is the good: Escaping from the bad -- because It is not possible for the Good to be placed anywhere, when neither What is painful nor What is distressing is any longer making way for it.

Τοῦτο αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶ: τὸ φυγεῖν τὸ κακόν -- ἔνθα γὰρ τεθήσεται Τάγαθόν οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅταν μὴθὲν ἔτι ὑπεξίη μήτε Ἄλγεινὸν μήτε Λυπηρόν. (Plutarch Non posse, 1091 A-B)"

Post by “Cassius” of November 15, 2023 at 11:07 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Metrodorus is quoted by Plutarch as "This very thing is the good: Escaping from the bad -- because It is not possible for the Good to be placed anywhere, when neither What is painful nor What is distressing is any longer making way for it.

Wow that's another one that if I've read it before I don't recall it --- but isn't that making exactly the same point in another way!

I don't want to press too hard since we're not talking about the Greek wording exactly, but do I read that correctly to say that we should understand that "removing pain" is the same thing as pleasure because pleasure cannot exist where pain resides?

Is the implication that like two atoms, where only one atom can be in a place at a time, you have to move pain out of the way for pleasure to occupy the same spot?

Now in this case we'd also want to refer back to where Torquatus said that we don't admit that when one pleasure leaves that pain *necessarily* fills its space, because the norm would be that one pleasure can take the place of another ("variety").

So there's not necessarily going to be a pain at a particular location if we've ordered our lives successfully, but as to adding *more* pleasure to the total we're experiencing, we can't add any more pleasure once all pain is ejected.

Are you reading it that way Bryan?

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 15, 2023 at 11:21 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

Experientially I have discovered this to be true but I don't think I could explain it in a good way.

Interestingly I am not sure that I would agree that "absence of pain = pleasure" can be "discovered to be true experientially" -- at least not fully.

Well by this I mean I examined the claim and originally dismissed it but after studying a bit more in the past 6 months (and further loosened the fetters of catholicism/monastery life) I

have accepted it due to the fact for Epicurus there is no neutral state it's always one or the other. After this experientially I have experienced it, not that it's some magical infused contemplative pleasure but just a low hymn of pleasure.

Post by “Bryan” of November 15, 2023 at 11:53 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is the implication that like two atoms, where only one atom can be in a place at a time, you have to move pain out of the way for pleasure to occupy the same spot?

Yes, as we have seen, the Cyrenaics viewed the removal of pain as a state of calm to which pleasure could then be added. Plato argued for the existence of mixed pleasures (μικτὰ ἡδοναί), which he imagined as pleasures which contained an aspect of pain.

In reality, at any particular time, pain and pleasure are mutually exclusive at any particular point in the body.

KD 3 ...whenever there is Pleasure,

then for that time that it is present,

there is no Pain or Sadness

or any Mixture of both.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 15, 2023 at 12:02 PM

The free knowledge on this forum is just amazing thanks everyone

Post by “Bryan” of November 15, 2023 at 5:12 PM

Also relevant is Vatican Saying 42, recently shared by [Onenski](#).

Ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως <τοῦ κακοῦ>.

The same moment has both the origin of the greatest good and the release from evil.

"The production of the greatest good and (the) release from evil (happens at) [the same time]."
[Epicurus Wiki]

"The same time corresponds to the birth of the greatest good and the dissolution of evil."
(Enrique Alvarez trans.)

Post by “Don” of November 15, 2023 at 6:28 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Also relevant is Vatican Saying 42, recently shared by Onenski.

Ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως <τοῦ κακοῦ>.

The same moment has both the origin of the greatest good and the release from evil.

Problem is there's no "from evil" in the manuscript.

Post by “Cassius” of November 15, 2023 at 6:35 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Problem is there's no "from evil" in the manuscript.

Don what did you conclude "should" be there at the end?

Edit: This is Don's post from earlier this month:

Post

[RE: VS42 - Versions of Vatican Saying 42](#)

I happened to tackle this exact saying here: [RE: If Death Is Nothing To Us, Then Life Is Everything to Us](#)

First, we return to the manuscript:

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/4260/

https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0255

Here's what I see in the manuscript itself:

Ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως.

The pivotal last word is:

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/4261/

From what I see it's ἀ'π^ολύσε(ως).

That last swoopy letter is a ligature substantiated in...



Don

November 8, 2023 at 10:49 PM

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 16, 2023 at 4:14 PM

Listened to a lecturer from about 10 years ago on Epicurus it gave me the idea of a prompt.

"Epicurean Philosophy teaches that absence of pain is pleasure"

"Ok, but isn't the goal of Epicureanism ataraxia and not pleasure? Also isn't the absence of pain just a tranquil state?"

How would you respond to someone like this?

For me all I could say is without a least some knowledge of the physics and canon it probably won't make sense.

Thinking about another reason I like Epicurean philosophy is that it is a full examination of reality, with Stoicism etc... it seems like they just pick a choose. For me that's unattractive, I

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/>

want a view which encompasses all of reality not merely the ethical side, as at that stage it just becomes endless debate over which ethic is right with no answer. Anyway just a tangent.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 16, 2023 at 4:54 PM

This is how I currently sort it:

Pleasure and pain are like opposite ends of a rope on a pulley: as one goes up, the other goes down. There is no neutral state.

The opposite of physical pleasure is ponos (pain, however mild or strong); the opposite of mental pleasure is tarache (disturbance). Aponia is the absence of pain; ataraxia, the absence of mental disturbance/dis-ease (e.g., anxiety).

Pleasures can be kinetic (e.g., orgasm) or katastematic (e.g., the lingering, contented afterglow). In the mental realm, suppose I suddenly conclude that an important check bounced: anxiety (tarache); then I realize that was an error and my finances are all in order: I relax, the anxiety abates, I rest in the satisfied realization (ataraxia).

So, on the one hand, I think that ataraxia can be episodic with tarache; on the other hand, I think a more enduring ataraxia can be cultivated – perhaps as a stable equanimity, rather like the Zen calm of a warrior in the turmoil of battle.

But it is not the apatheia of the Stoics: ataraxia is felt -- at least as a background felt-sense.

Post by “Cassius” of November 16, 2023 at 7:18 PM

Pacatus if that makes sense to you I say go for it.

I think I am content to say in plain English that because there are no gods and absolute rules and no heaven and hell to calculate for, I am left to look to nature for guidance, and nature gives me only pleasure and pain. I want as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. In evaluating what is pleasure I include everything that is agreeable to me, and I find agreeable both active stimulation from the outside as well as my own "quieter" internal appreciation of healthy normal mental and bodily life.

We can embellish all that with lots of additional words but I see no reason to be concerned that the ancient Epicureans saw things in a much more complicated way than that. The

commentators can fight over the details as long as they like but I won't let them worry me that I'm missing anything more sophisticated than what I just described, because at the end of my life I am unlikely to be any better off than Epicurus himself, offsetting pleasure against pain as best I can.

Post by "Don" of November 17, 2023 at 12:10 AM

[Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

"Epicurean Philosophy teaches that absence of pain is pleasure"

"Ok, but isn't the goal of Epicureanism ataraxia and not pleasure? Also isn't the absence of pain just a tranquil state?"

How would you respond to someone like this?

The goal, the fulfillment, of a life of well-being consists of both the health of the body and the tranquility of the mind. The absence of pain in the body and of disturbance in the mind IS pleasure, because there are only two feelings we can experience: pleasure and pain. Being alive is to experience sensations, to FEEL things. At the most basic level, we either feel positive nurturing feelings, which we call pleasure; or negative harmful feelings, which we call pain. Within pleasure and pain, there are numerous shades and intensities of feeling; from ecstasy to serenity, from annoyance to agony.

But when we rid ourselves of the gnawing anxiety and the dreadful worry about death, divine retribution, and the like, we can have a tranquil mind, we can have "ataraxia." If we have tranquility of mind, we can FEEL our other positive feelings more clearly, untainted by the nagging worry that it'll all fade away. Once we rid ourselves of those fears and worries, when they are uprooted and torn from the ground of our mind, they can't grow back. We can then make better choices. We can pluck the ripe fruit of each moment and REALLY savor it. That is the goal of Epicureanism. If you say a tranquil mind - ataraxia - is the only goal and don't include the health of the body, you stop short of the fulfilling life that Epicurus offers. Yes, you NEED a tranquil mind free from anxiety and worry... but you also need a healthy body attached to that tranquil mind. The mind works through the body, and the body provides the mind with its seat. We are both a mind and a body, together, inseparable. Pleasure is the path but also the fulfillment of prudent choices and rejections. Tranquility - ataraxia - makes the sea calm for sailing. When other pleasures are encountered, they are welcomed but not greedily grasped. You are already at the fullness of pleasure! The horizon beckons with a variety of pleasures to experience. Sail off. You are already filled with pleasure, secure in your own self-reliance, your mind is strong and unassailable by worry, anxiety, fears, and dread. You've drunk the wormwood through the honeyed rim. The medicine is sweet. The physician was correct. This is

the way to live!

Post by "Cassius" of November 17, 2023 at 1:59 AM

I think Don's post 15 is very close to where it needs to be, but I sense there is still equivocation on the issue that the single word that expresses the ultimate goal in most sweeping terms is not "Tranquility" or "Ataraxia" but "Pleasure."

(And this post is not by any means targeted at Don. We're all doing this at times, me included. Eoghan has asked for proposed responses to explanations to outsiders, and that's what we're working on improving.)

Pleasure is the global term; tranquility and ataraxia are fully contained within the word pleasure, but "pleasure" is not fully contained within tranquility or ataraxia. There are pleasures which do not involve tranquility or calmness or any other similar term. Are those other pleasures less "worthy" than calmness?

When tranquility and ataraxia are used in a way that conveys that they, and not pleasure, are the goal, then the other pleasures are deprecated, and the issue of their status remains muddy. Epicurus was extending the definition of the word Pleasure so that it would include all agreeable feelings, including feelings such as Don is describing and that many people don't ordinarily think of as "Pleasure." If we fail to follow his lead and use the umbrella term, then we're throwing away the main tool that gets us to the point of clarifying what pursuing "pleasure" really means and how it fits into "the nature of things."

The reason this is a continuing question, and the reason that Eoghan is posing it again, is that the orthodox view is that it is wrong to say that "Pleasure" is the goal. The orthodox gatekeepers of acceptability say we should be saying "Tranquility" or "Ataraxia" or some other "acceptable" word instead. And in most cases they are not saying it because they really believe in calmness -- they're saying it because they have another agenda, and they don't want *you* to see pleasure as a legitimate goal.

I don't think these questions will ever begin to clarify in peoples' minds unless the focus remains first, last, and always on "Pleasure." We should say to heck with the nay-sayers who think that the medicine is too bitter to drink. This issue has become as muddy as it is precisely because of this equivocation that we all are tempted to make -- We all know that the Stoics and the Buddhists and the Humanists and the Virtue-crowd are the majority, and we hear in their tone of voice the same condescension and bitterness that we hear in Cicero's abhorrence at the very idea of saying that "Pleasure" is the goal of life.

We should make a clean break with that equivocation and never back down from saying clearly that "Pleasure" is the goal of life. After that, we can then explain all the many facets of what "Pleasure" means for as long and as far as we'd like to go. But the battle is going to be won or lost on keeping it clear that it is Pleasure which is the banner under which we're traveling, and the banner's not ataraxia or aponia or tranquility or any other word than "Pleasure."

When you enter a discussion looking like you're apologizing for the word Pleasure, then you look afraid and you lose the argument before it's even started.

We're "Living for Pleasure," and we're not "Living For Ataraxia" or "Living for Tranquility" or anything else - unless, that is, that we're ready to admit that joy and gladness and what everyone admits to be under the definition of Pleasure are not a legitimate part of the goal of life. Every time we indicate that Ataraxia or Tranquility is more important than Pleasure we are repudiating the definition of pleasure that Epicurus was promoting. An apt analogy is Peter swearing to Jesus that he is a disciple and then immediately turning around and denying him three times before the cock crowed.

If we don't insist on continuing to use the word "Pleasure" as the description of the goal, then we're admitting that the Ciceros of the world have won. No one really believes that there is some special transcendental state constituting "ataraxia" or "tranquility" which is outside of pleasure and is the real goal of life. The issue is whether we are going to defend the word "Pleasure," or whether we retreat under pressure to what we think is a respectable euphemism, and admit that Cicero has won.

Torquatus didn't retreat and we shouldn't either.

Post by "Kalosyni" of November 17, 2023 at 7:43 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Pleasure is the global term; tranquility and ataraxia are fully contained within the word pleasure, but "pleasure" is not fully contained within tranquility or ataraxia. There are pleasures which do not involve tranquility or calmness or any other similar term. Are those other pleasures less "worthy" than calmness?

I wonder if the idea of "mixed" pleasure might need some further examination because it seems that there may be pleasures which are mixed with a tinge of mental uncertainty. There are times in life when you chose pleasures in which you are uncertain what the final result will be (mental pain or a minor problem may result but you are fairly confident that you won't end

up physically wounded or dead).

And thought that came to me regarding "pleasure is the absence of pain" is that this is simply a guide or a tool to find moderation...rather than arbitrarily deciding "I will only eat one heaping full plate of spaghetti" then if you use the phrase "pleasure is the absence of pain" to decide to stop eating when you aren't feeling hungry anymore.

So it is moderation based on sensation and not on abstractions.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 17, 2023 at 7:52 AM

The best pleasures are those which occur without pain, and when we are in a state of being without pain we come to appreciate it as being a pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2023 at 7:53 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I wonder if the idea of "mixed" pleasure might need some further examination because it seems that there may be pleasures which are mixed with a tinge of mental uncertainty. There are times in life when you chose pleasures in which you are uncertain what the final result will be (mental pain or a minor problem may result but you are fairly confident that you won't end up physically wounded or dead).

OK someone correct me if I am wrong but care has to be taken here: "mixed" is exactly what a feeling **never** is: a feeling is either pleasure, or it is pain. It is never "both" or "neither" or "mixed."

"Mixed" is a word that describes results which have multiple feelings, in that Epicurus' feelings were mixed on his last day - he felt some pleasure and some pain -- but in different parts of his experience. His gladness of his feelings for his friends was not mixed - it "co-existed" in his experience with other experiences which were painful.

But at the feeling level, feelings are discrete, at the total experience level, multiple feelings co-exist to produce the full level of experience that we're talking about as 100%, such as 60% pleasurable feelings and 40% painful feelings.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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"Moderation" is never the ultimate goal either, any more than calmness is the 'ultimate' goal. Moderation in eating is a tool to find pleasure. It's pleasure that is the ultimate goal and sometimes you're going to eat more than other times. So I'd say you never set out to "Find moderation," you set out to find pleasure, through which moderation is often (not always) an appropriate tool.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 17, 2023 at 8:01 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

"Moderation" is never the ultimate goal either, any more than calmness is the 'ultimate' goal. Moderation in eating is a tool to find pleasure. It's pleasure that is the ultimate goal and sometimes you're going to eat more than other times. So I'd say you never set out to "Find moderation," you set out to find pleasure, through which moderation is often (not always) an appropriate tool.

Great point all things must be means to an end which is pleasure, it's good to be temperate in eating and drinking insofar as it leads to a pleasurable life, so then we can say it's good to over indulge insofar as it leads to a pleasurable life, when and where you should over indulge only you can calculate.

Post by “Don” of November 17, 2023 at 8:16 AM

That's a *great* post 16, [Cassius](#) !! Well said!

My 15 post was very much an experiment in stream of consciousness writing with a little editing after the fact. I'm okay with it for what it is.

I completely agree that "pleasure" is the North Star of Epicurus's philosophy. He defined it in *all-encompassing* terms precisely because he made it the guide of life. However...

I continue to read the texts as saying Epicurus and the ancient Epicureans taught the distinction of katastematic and "kinetic" pleasure as a practical expression of that all-encompassing nature, and that we can be more confident of always having access to katastematic pleasure than kinetic pleasures. However...

The recent in-depth discussions of "absence of pain = pleasure" have given me a new perspective on the katastematic/kinetic "debate." The health of the body and the tranquillity of the mind *is* katastematic pleasure. The "normal" functioning of freedom from pain in body and mind that has been discussed *is* katastematic pleasure. "Absence of pain" in the mind is literally ataraxia which Epicurus gives as an example of *a* katastematic pleasure. No matter what else is going on in our lives, we always have access to that health of the body and tranquillity of the mind IF we allow it to happen, IF we have banished those fears, anxieties, worries that Epicurus taught stand in the way of experiencing *pleasure** in its all-encompassing joyful, delightful, calm, exciting, tranquil variations.

Post by "Cassius" of November 17, 2023 at 9:04 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The recent in-depth discussions of "absence of pain = pleasure" have given me a new perspective on the katastematic/kinetic "debate." The health of the body and the tranquillity of the mind *is* katastematic pleasure. The "normal" functioning of freedom from pain in body and mind that has been discussed *is* katastematic pleasure. "Absence of pain" in the mind is literally ataraxia which Epicurus gives as an example of *a* katastematic pleasure.

Yes I think this is the way things are going, and I think we are essentially in total agreement. Expressing these things is tricky and that's where we can get better with practice. For example in Kalosyni's post above as to how to describe "mixed situations" I think we have to be careful and precise, and it relates back to the discussion we had recently about how to evaluate things that are going on simultaneously, like the separate pains and pleasures of Epicurus' last day.

Part of the weight that remains to be removed from the "absence of pain" terminology is how to flip back and forth easily between seeing that you don't have to expect every ounce of pleasure from life before you can experience any pleasure, but on the other hand it is proper and helpful to talk about exactly that -- the theoretical goal IS to expel every ounce of pain, at which you would have reached the limit of pleasure.

I think that's what can be confusing about the way Cicero's Torquatus is flipping so quickly from saying "the absence of pain is pleasure" to saying " the absence of pain is in fact the HIGHEST pleasure."

At least for me, I am not yet familiar enough with the dual implications to move from one to the other and back again without confusing the issue and thinking that, "Well if I can't hit the highest pleasure without expelling every ounce of pain, then there is a "kind of pleasure" that I'll never reach, because I am afraid I am never going to be 100% successful at expelling all pain."

Apparently there is something in my thought process (not sure what yet) that makes me think that "the perfect is the enemy of the good" and that there is a tension between 100% pleasure and 99% pleasure (another title of a recent thread). Somehow the theoretical goal of 100% pleasure seems an insult to 99% pleasure, and yet I think it would make no sense at all that somehow it takes a totally different set of tools and actions to achieve 100% pleasure rather than 99% pleasure.

The Buddhist/Stoic planted implication is that the only way to reach 100% pleasure is by being an ascetic, because only by denying yourself most of the ordinary pleasures of life will you never have any disappointment or letdown, and you're infinitely better off doing so rather than living a life of 99% normal pleasurable activities. All of that is because 100% is infinitely better and more to be chosen than 99%. And I think that makes no sense and it's no way it could have been Epicurus' position.

"Absence of pain" sounds to me (maybe conditioned by religion?) like an absolutist position, and yet Torquatus and apparently the ancient Epicureans are flipping right from "anything that is not painful is pleasurable" to "and to be totally without pain is the greatest pleasure."

I think seeing how "being totally without pain is the greatest pleasure" relates to "anything that is not pain is pleasure" remains to be the subject of a lot of discussion and essays and memes and explanations to make that more clear.

And that's what reminded me to repost the "[Perspectives Chart](#)" I started working on. It needs total reworking but this issue is what is driving that -- making clear how to get comfortable with flipping between constructions that say 'the absence of pain is pleasure, and indeed the greatest pleasure.' That "indeed" reflects a perspective we have to learn.

Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2023 at 9:34 AM

Thinking out loud about some potential rhetoric that needs to be fine-tuned but here's the thought:

Q: What's the difference between Pop Modern Epicureanism and Classical Greco-Roman Epicureanism?

A: Pop Modern Epicureans accept Cicero's argument that absence of pain (ataraxia / tranquility) is something different and higher than Pleasure, while Classical Greco-Roman Epicureans laughed in Cicero's face at the very idea.

Quote

Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be." ...

Cicero: Still, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible." Cicero - "On Ends" Book 2:iii:9 and 2:iii:11 (Rackham)

Post by “Pacatus” of November 17, 2023 at 12:46 PM

[Cassius](#): Your post #16 above is a powerfully well-crafted and articulate homily on pleasure, in response to Eoghan's question – so much so that I've bookmarked it for myself.

The niggling concern I would have with stopping there, though, is that without the kind of “fleshing out” in [Don](#)'s post #21 (which I've also bookmarked), especially the part I quote below, your post #16 could almost have been written by an Aristippian Cyrenaic* (even with your opening point that “tranquility and ataraxia are fully contained within the word pleasure, but ‘pleasure’ is not fully contained within tranquility or ataraxia”). Unless I glossed over something in my reading (not enough coffee yet 😞) ...

[Don](#): "The health of the body and the tranquillity of the mind *is* katastematic pleasure. The "normal" functioning of freedom from pain in body and mind that has been discussed *is* katastematic pleasure. "Absence of pain" in the mind is literally ataraxia which Epicurus gives as an example of *a* katastematic pleasure. No matter what else is going on in our lives, we always have access to that health of the body and tranquillity of the mind IF we allow it to happen, IF we have banished those fears, anxieties, worries that Epicurus taught stand in the way of experiencing *pleasure** in its all-encompassing joyful, delightful, calm, exciting, tranquil variations."

Add [Don](#) 's statement, or something like it, to your homily (I mean that as a positive characterization!), and I think you have a pretty complete brief "epitome" - or at least a powerful opening summary - of the Epicuran telos. 😊

+++++

* At least of the kind Kurt Lampe discusses in his *The Birth of Hedonism*, where he attempts to correct some of the cruder interpretations of the Cyrenaics.

Post by "Cassius" of November 17, 2023 at 2:36 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

The niggling concern I would have with stopping there, though, is that without the kind of "fleshing out" in Don 's post #21 (which I've also bookmarked), especially the part I quote below, your post #16 could almost have been written by an Aristippian Cyrenaic* (even with your opening point that "tranquility and ataraxia are fully contained within the word pleasure, but 'pleasure' is not fully contained within tranquility or ataraxia"). Unless I glossed over something in my reading (not enough coffee yet 😞) ...

I think what you're observing there is the issue of how context affects the presentation of detailed issues. I perceive Eoghan's post as referring more to "non-specialists in 2023 who speak English who want to get started understanding what Epicurus stands for." In that context I would say you want to explain the differing aspects of "Pleasure" as fully as possible in understandable everyday English without use of foreign or very technical words.

The context where the people you are talking to are familiar with the controversies regarding kinetic and katastematic labels, and are wondering why there is so much discussion about those terms in some quarters, is different. For them, I think you want to then move to Don's passages and explain to them how "katastematic" and "kinetic" map pretty neatly onto

"stimulating pleasures" and "other kinds of pleasure which don't necessarily result from stimulation."

Only the most advanced in reading are really going to be interested in the controversy as to whether these labels derive from Diogenes Laertius mapping later developments (such as Carneades) on top of Epicurus, or whether they derive from years of interactions with the Stoics, or whether Epicurus himself held those these labels to be extremely important.

What's clear from any perspective is that just as Epicurus was narrowing his definition of "Gods" to exclude supernatural implications, he was expanding his definition of "pleasure" to include not only "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll" but "pleasures of normal daily living which derive from the mind's appreciation of the normal healthy state as something that is desirable in itself." In both cases the majority of people are using these words in a significantly different way, so explanations are necessary to avoid both innocent misunderstandings and intentional misrepresentations. (I use scare quotes just to indicate that the formulations are tentative, not that I'm quoting anyone.)

[VS29](#). For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many. [\[12\]](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of November 17, 2023 at 3:01 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In that context I would say you want to explain the differing aspects of "Pleasure" as fully as possible in understandable everyday English without use of foreign or very technical words.

Agreed. And I think both your and Don's posts could be slightly altered and combined to use just English instead of words like atarxia, aponia, kinetic, katastematic and the like (using such as tranquility/serenity, bodily ease and health, active pursuit of pleasure and lingering/stable enjoyment, etc. – though those might not be the best: just a quick off-the-top-of-my-head).

Anyway, your post really triggered a kind of “Aha!” moment in me – slow and stubborn learner that I am! 🤔😊

(But I still think my pulley metaphor was pretty good ... 😊)

Post by “Don” of November 17, 2023 at 3:03 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

(But I still think my pulley metaphor was pretty good ... 😊)

Agreed!

Post by “Godfrey” of November 17, 2023 at 3:31 PM

I'm jumping into this late, but in response to [Kalosyni](#) 's post about mixed pleasures, I'd like to put in a plug for my current favorite categorization of feelings as being composed of the three aspects of intensity, location and duration (as can be discerned from the PDs).

Examining these aspects helps me to deepen my understanding of pleasure, and to realize that there are innumerable locations where we experience pleasure (big toe, little toe, stomach, thoughts about death, thoughts about previous happy experiences, stimulation of listening to music &c) and that I can maximize my pleasure partly by doing things that maximize the locations and duration of my pleasure. Because of the innumerable locations and potentially overlapping durations, pleasure is, most likely, always "mixed" overall (unless you're a god...). Part of maximizing my pleasure is understanding which locations of pleasure (which some people might refer to as "types" of pleasure) are the most personally satisfying, and in what intensities and durations.

I have a niggling feeling that k&k pleasures have a relationship to these three aspects. But I don't think that these aspects are a defining characteristic of k&k, or vice versa. I'm currently thinking of them as two mental models, and people can utilize whichever is most useful to them, or both. A third mental model is the categories of desires. The three mental models seem to me to work well together, reinforcing one another. But I see all three as well-conceived tools for helping people understand and maximize their pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2023 at 3:32 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Pleasure and pain are like opposite ends of a rope on a pulley: as one goes up, the other goes down. There is no neutral state.

Every analogy has its issues but yes I like that too, especially if you can fix your attention on the ropes hanging parallel with each other and not worry about the point at which the rope is at the very "top" of the pulley and going neither up nor down.

Just like the analogies with the balance scales, where the sides are exactly balanced and you have to deal with how to label the pointer (or the balance) being precisely even.

This is where I think you have to go back to being clear about your perspective. From the "whole person" perspective I would say that discrete pains and pleasures can "balance each other out" where it's hard to say which of the two is greater. But from the perspective of placing weights representing pleasure on one side, and weights representing pain on the other, you're always measuring discrete feelings.

The pointer of the dial may indicate dead zero in sum, but what you're measuring is always an accumulation of (1) discrete feelings of pleasure against (2) discrete feelings of pain, and you're never placing on the scale "neithers" or "something else" or "neutrals" or "mixeds."

Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2023 at 3:35 PM

I didn't see Godfrey's post 28 before posting my 29. I think our posts are consistent. A variety of mental models are helpful for unwinding the different perspectives.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Because of the innumerable locations and potentially overlapping durations, pleasure is, most likely, always "mixed" overall (unless you're a god...).

That's what I have described as the "whole person" perspective -- there are lots of things going on at one time in separate parts of experience, and the end result of looking at them in total is "mixed." But the individual components are like oil and water, they can be stirred together into a mix but they don't merge into something new.

Post by “warjuning” of December 2, 2023 at 12:47 PM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/>

Maybe it could be said, that pleasure is an activity that is connatural to us, as the healthy functioning of the mind and body and the awareness thereof. The more we reduce and eliminate pain, the easier it will be for our natural wealth to sprout from within us, in the form of continuous pleasure.

Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 9:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

OK someone correct me if I am wrong but care has to be taken here: "mixed" is exactly what a feeling *never* is: a feeling is either pleasure, or it is pain. It is never "both" or "neither" or "mixed."

"Mixed" is a word that describes results which have multiple feelings, in that Epicurus' feelings were mixed on his last day - he felt some pleasure and some pain -- but in different parts of his experience. His gladness of his feelings for his friends was not mixed - it "co-existed" in his experience with other experiences which were painful.

But at the feeling level, feelings are discrete, at the total experience level, multiple feelings co-exist to produce the full level of experience that we're talking about as 100%, such as 60% pleasurable feelings and 40% painful feelings.

Apologies for reviving such an old thread - I've been doing some digging around the forum!

I see the logic behind feelings being either pleasure or pain, not both. I can have an aching belly but still find pleasure in the warmth of the sun hitting my face or in the sound of the birds singing. At the same time though, I can't help but feel some feelings are truly mixed. For instance, if I reminisce over some former partner, I might feel both glad for the good memories and sore about losing them. That is to say, what is often described as "bittersweet".

How do you reconcile this?

Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 9:59 AM

In most cases what I think people think of as mixed are the different reactions in different aspects of their experience, like walking and chewing gum at the same time. Epicurus' pleasure at his philosophy and his friends did not eliminate the pain that he was experiencing in parts of his body on his last day.

There's also the aspect of giving labels to things. Feelings of pleasure and pain are things that occur prior to labels being affixed to them. So yes you can identify a word that encompasses all sorts of reactions at the same time, but that doesn't mean that your natural faculty of pleasure and pain has laid them out that way for you. This is analogous to the eyes and other senses. The eyes and other senses do not assign words to what they are perceiving, they just provide raw perceptual data.

Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 10:34 AM

Hmm, I'm still not sure I understand. The whole "not mixed, but different reactions in different aspects of their experience" part just feels like semantics to me, rather than an actual distinction.

Could you explain it through the example I gave of thinking back to a past romance?

[Cassius](#)

Post by “Cassius” of April 16, 2025 at 11:18 AM

Thinking back to past romances, some of those people were better at different aspects of life than others. Some were smarter, some were more athletic, some were richer - any combination of characteristics you can think of - some brought different combinations of pleasures and pains to the table, all of which I can choose to think of as a lump sum or I can choose to evaluate them independently, and each step of the way during the review those aspects are going to ring painfully or pleasurable. But the bottom line is that if you remember it as affecting you at all, you remember it either positively or negatively, with greater or less duration, greater or less intensity, or greater or less part of the body or mind that is affected. But if you judge it to have affected you, and if it did not affect you painfully, then it is justifiable to judge the affect to have been pleasurable, because you choose to judge all experiences in life to be pleasurable unless they are painful.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/>

Some of the cites behind that are here:
https://wiki.epicureanfriends.com/doku.php/the_norm_is_pleasure_too

Post by “kochiekoch” of April 16, 2025 at 2:26 PM

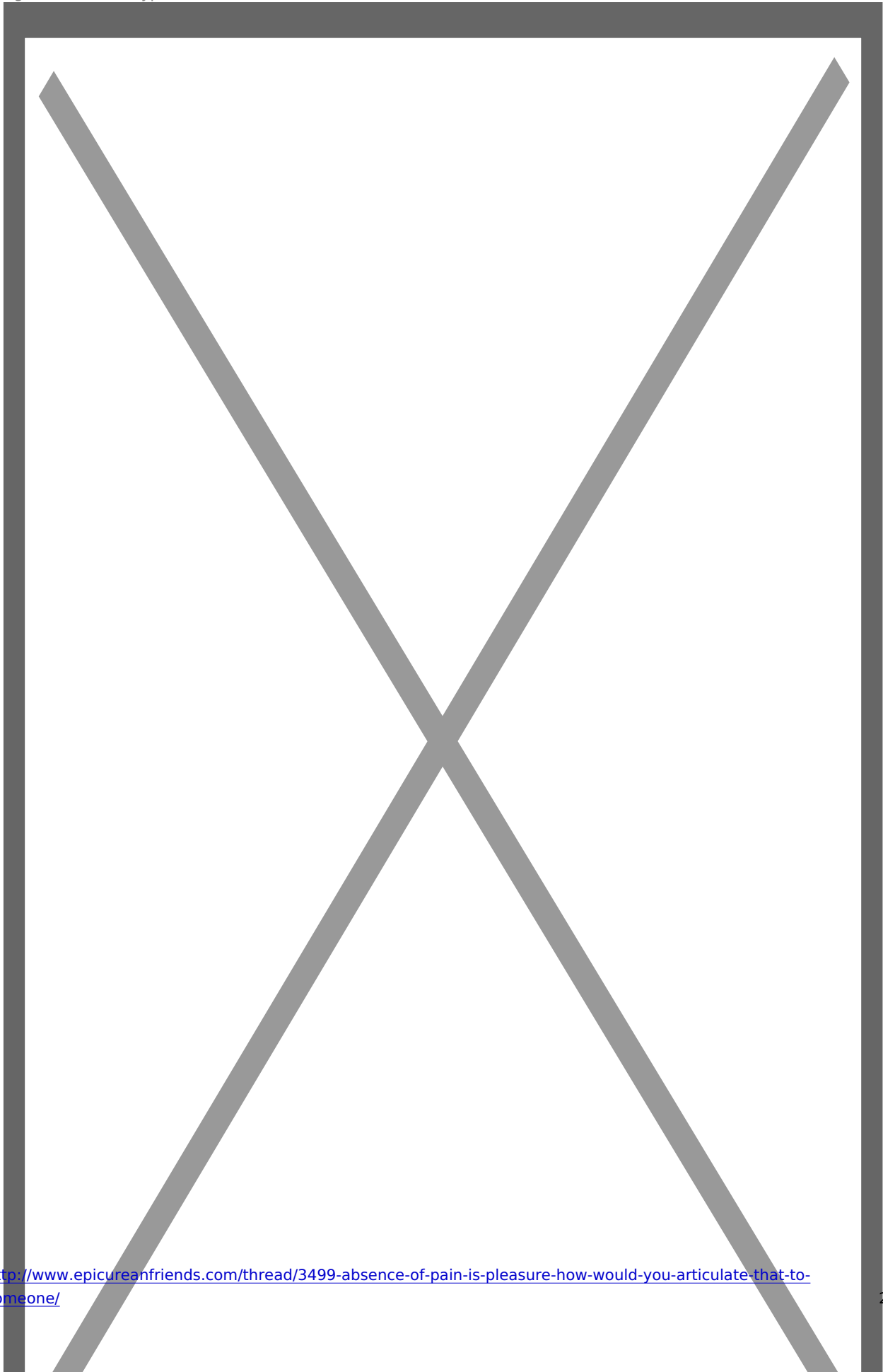
Hi Rolf and welcome! 😊

'Bittersweet' memories of past romances are rough. I know.

Epicurus, I believe would have counseled to have gratitude for the pleasure of the experience and the skills acquired for the next romance. This way the pleasure outweighs the pain.

Sounds trite and true but valid in my opinion: 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all'.

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<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/>

[5 Famous Literary Quotes Explained: “Tis Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” — History Through Fiction](#)

You probably know, and perhaps can relate to the line, “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” Find out where the line originates...

www.historythroughfiction.com

Post by “Godfrey” of April 16, 2025 at 5:00 PM

[PD09](#): *If every pleasure were condensed and were present at the same time and in the whole of one's nature or its primary parts, then the pleasures would never differ from one another.*

Pleasure can be examined in terms of intensity, location and duration. If you really look at your present experience at any time, you may find that you're happy even though you just stubbed your toe. Or that your toe feels intense pain, but your belly is pleasantly full. As to mental pleasures of the bittersweet variety, I think of them as comparable to multitasking. Current neuroscience (to my understanding) has found that multitasking is in actuality just rapid task switching. In the same way, I would posit that bittersweet is actually bitterthensweetthenbitterthensweetetc. The pleasant memory prompts the pain of loss, which might then be replaced by a pleasant memory and so on. Or a pleasant memory may prompt the pain of loss, and the pain of loss lingers. Or vice versa.

An experiment that I occasionally do is when I feel like I'm in a neutral state, I try to really examine how I'm feeling. I always find that I'm experiencing pleasure and/or pain: it's just that the intensity may be very low, or a pleasure somewhere is offsetting a pain elsewhere. We are constantly experiencing pleasure/pain, both as a complete organism and in our various parts. Some of these concepts need to be felt as well as reasoned out, which is part of the point of the Epicurean canonic.

Post by “Rolf” of April 16, 2025 at 5:22 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Thinking back to past romances, some of those people were better at different aspects of life than others. Some were smarter, some were more athletic, some were richer - any combination of characteristics you can think of - some brought different combinations of pleasures and pains to the table, all of which I can choose to think of

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Hmm, I'm not necessarily referring to a past relationship that was both good and bad. What I'm talking about is more the bittersweet feeling that comes with reminiscing over something pleasant that has been lost. Romantic heartbreak, a child moving away from home, a close relative passing away.

For the sake of example, let's assume that that which has been lost was primarily or purely pleasant. When reminiscing over these, one feels both joy over the good memories and sadness over the loss. A bittersweet feeling.

How is this to be reconciled under the Epicurean view of "pleasure or pain, not both"?

[Quote from kochiekoch](#)

Hi Rolf and welcome! 😊

'Bittersweet' memories of past romances are rough. I know.

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<https://www.historythroughfiction.com/blog/famous-literary-quotes-four>

Thanks Koch, happy to be here!

I'm not asking about how Epicurus would handle past romances, but how these bittersweet feelings are reconciled within the Epicurean view of pleasure and pain. According to the Epicurean view, pleasure and pain cannot be felt simultaneously (in the same part of the body?). Thus, I am unsure how such bittersweet feelings fit in.

That said, I completely agree with your approach to breakups. 😊

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/>

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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An experiment that I occasionally do is when I feel like I'm in a neutral state, I try to really examine how I'm feeling. I always find that I'm experiencing pleasure and/or pain: it's just that the intensity may be very low, or a pleasure somewhere is offsetting a pain elsewhere. We are constantly experiencing pleasure/pain, both as a complete organism and in our various parts. Some of these concepts need to be felt as well as reasoned out, which is part of the point of the Epicurean canonic.

Aha! It's starting to click for me now. "Bitterthensweetthenbitterthensweet" is a good way of describing it. I certainly agree that "these concepts need to be felt as well as reasoned out" - these things can be awfully confusing from a logical perspective but clear as day when experienced. Sort of in the same way that people can debate endlessly on the meaning of "pleasure" and "pain", when in fact it is terribly obvious to anyone (or anything) that has been alive.

The experiment you mentioned is a good idea. I'll have to try that. Though to be honest, when I start focusing intensely on how I feel, I usually end up fixating on minor bodily aches and pains...

Thanks for your replies, everyone!