

Is All "Ataraxia" Equal?

Post by "Cassius" of November 18, 2023 at 7:47 PM

A new participant in the forum posted a graphic today that reminds us of that the word "Ataraxia" is associated with Epicurus. We've discussed that word from many perspectives, but I would like to further the discussion:

Let's resolve to be as obstinate as Torquatus was, and let's say that "absence of pain" **IS** "pleasure." If all absence of pain is pleasure, then the number and types of experiences of human life that fall within the term pleasure are dramatically expanded. That perspective would imply that **every** experience of human life that is not painful is pleasurable. No middle ground; no neutral; no third position. Let's take that perspective as agreed for the moment and consider two examples Torquatus gave.

The hand in its normal condition and not feeling any pain is not only in a state of pleasure, but in the greatest pleasure. What do we presume about this "normal condition?" Does not the "normal condition" of the hand include not only those hands that are motionless, but also hands being in regular use doing the things hands normally do, from drumming fingernails on a desktop to holding things and squeezing things and on and on and on? I would say that the hand can and does innumerable things in its normal pain-free condition. If so, then the hand is at the height of pleasure whether motionless or whether being massaged by a professional masseuse. In each case the hand is at the height of pleasure. Does that mean it is no concern to me whether the hand is motionless, or is being massaged by a masseuse? Should the hand (if it could think) be equally satisfied in either case and take no notice of the difference?

Another example from Torquatus is this one: A host at a party is pouring wine for a thirsty guest who is drinking it. Both are stipulated to have no pain: the host because he had no pain to begin with, and the guest because his only pain (thirst) is alleviated by the drinking. Both therefore have no pain, and are therefore considered to be at the height of pleasure. Does that mean that it should be of no concern whether we are the host or the guest? Should we view both the experience of pouring and the experience of drinking as exactly the same and never express a preference between the two?

I think Epicurus might answer those questions in this way:

*"First of all, both the motionless hand and the massaged hand, and both the pouring host and the drinking guest, are at the height of pleasure because we have stated that they have no pain in their experience. Someone whose life is "full" of pleasure cannot have his quantity of pleasure experienced, because he is already full. But **of course** the two sets of experiences are not the same in every respect. Only a dolt would say that being massaged is the same as being*

motionless, or that pouring wine is the same experience as drinking it. I am not a dolt, and you are not a dolt, and you should not think that I am saying that all ways of experiencing pleasure, or "absence of pain," are the same and equally to be chosen. Some experiences of pleasure are to be chosen over other experiences of pleasure, and some ways of experiencing absence of pain are to be preferred over other ways of experiencing absence of pain. No person's life is identical to another person's experience, and you have to decide which way to pursue the goal of absence of pain for yourself. As I told Menoeceus, the wise man chooses not the pleasure that is the longest but that which is most pleasant, and by that you should understand that I know the difference between drinking water and drinking wine - and you should too!"

Would you agree with what I am suggesting Epicurus would say?

After thinking about that, let me ask the question Eoghan asked about "absence pain" [in another recent thread](#). Consider how you would articulate an answer to someone who asks you this question:

"You have said Ataraxia is desirable. Is all Ataraxia the same?" How should I consider any differences in the experience of ataraxia in determining how I am going to live my life? Does the pleasantness of my experiences while I am not disturbed have anything to do with it? Am I supposed to consider the location, duration, and intensity of pleasures, or are all pleasures of equal significance to me so long as I am not disturbed?

How would you articulate the answer to that question to someone?

I think we have made a lot of progress in seeing how "absence of pain" *is* pleasure. Now we need to go back and integrate whether all pleasures are identical, or some are to be chosen over others, and how. Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance, or can one pleasure be so much more pleasing than another that it is worth choosing, even if choosing that greater pleasure brings some degree of disturbance?

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 9:58 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Now we need to go back and integrate whether all pleasures are identical, or some are to be chosen over others, and how. Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance, or can one pleasure be so much more pleasing than another that it is worth choosing, even if choosing that greater

pleasure brings some degree of disturbance?

Here's my quick take:

- Pleasure feels good. That's what makes it pleasure and not pain.
- Choiceworthiness is determined by consequences, both to oneself and how one is perceived by one's community and friends.
- "Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance." Yes.
- "Can one pleasure be so much more pleasing than another that it is worth choosing?" That's just another way of asking "What are the consequences of this pleasure vs that pleasure?"
- I continue to soapbox that we can have more confidence in accessing some pleasures than others (the infamous katastematic vs "kinetic" discussion).

Post by “Cassius” of November 19, 2023 at 11:47 AM

My opening post was far too wordy but that quick take makes it easier to focus. My comments in red:

Here's my quick take:

1. Pleasure feels good. That's what makes it pleasure and not pain. Comment: No controversy there.
2. Choiceworthiness is determined by consequences, both to oneself and how one is perceived by one's community and friends. Comment: Not much controversy there, though I would say that "how one is perceived by one's community and friends" ultimately resolves to being significant because it will lead to a consequence to oneself.
3. "Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance." Yes. Comment: This is where I think more explanation is required, and my question may not be worded in an optimum way. The "some" was intended to be a reference to measure. The question might be better stated as "Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether choosing one pleasure might produce one unit of pain, while another pleasure might produce zero units of pain?" The real point of the question is whether "any amount of pain" is sufficient to make one choose one pleasure over another, or whether you have to quantify BOTH the amount of pleasure and the amount of pain in order to make a decision.
4. "Can one pleasure be so much more pleasing than another that it is worth choosing?" That's just another way of asking "What are the consequences of this pleasure vs that

pleasure?" Comment: Yes I agree that's another way of asking the same question, the answer which I think is "Yes." Agreed?

5. I continue to soapbox that we can have more confidence in accessing some pleasures than others (the infamous katastematic vs "kinetic" discussion). Comment: In this context I will say that "availability of access" is probably not a key factor in dealing with this issue. Yes accessing some pleasures will be easier (involve less pain) than others. But I don't think "involving less pain to access" is the full answer to the question of which pleasures to pursue. If it were, then the rest of the discussion would be resolved in favor of a rule that "Pursue first and foremost those pleasures which are easiest to access" and that would be fairly interpretable, standing alone, as "live in a cave on bread and water."

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 12:02 PM

Just reading down through and saw:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The question might be better stated as "Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether choosing one pleasure might produce one unit of pain, while another pleasure might produce zero units of pain?"

Oh, no, no. Once you start down pain and pleasure "units" - dolors and hedons - you've left Epicurean philosophy and are talking Utilitarian philosophy. Which is one reason I'm reluctant to wholeheartedly endorse [Godfrey](#)'s location, intensity, duration formulation.

[Quote from Pomona website](#)

For Bentham, the value of pleasure and pain can be given by two quantitative measurements: intensity (how strong is the feeling?) and duration (how long does it last?) (see Bentham [1789] 1993, ch. 4).

For Mill, there is a qualitative dimension to pleasure that Bentham did not recognize. According to Mill, some pleasures are more valuable than others because they are higher quality pleasures. Take two pleasures of similar quantities, that is, of the same intensity and duration. If one is higher quality than the other, it will be better, even though the quantities of pleasure are the same. In fact, a smaller quantity of a higher quality pleasure will be more valuable than a larger quantity of a lower quality pleasure.

Post by “Don” of November 19, 2023 at 12:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Pursue first and foremost those pleasures which are easiest to access" and that would be fairly interpretable, standing alone, as "live in a cave on bread and water."

Regardless of the possible bread and water interpretation, I think this *is* what Epicurus taught. Know - at a gut level - what you absolutely need to live a self-sufficient, pleasurable life of well-being. Then you *know* if everything else was tragically taken from you, IF all other sources of (kinetic) pleasure were removed from you, you would still be able to lead a life of pleasure without pain on that. BUT he also taught to ENJOY the varieties of pleasure available to us here and now.

Post by “Cassius” of November 19, 2023 at 12:32 PM

Yep now we are getting to the reasons why this needs to be discussed.

[Quote from Don](#)

. Once you start down pain and pleasure "units" - dolors and hedons - you've left Epicurean philosophy and are talking Utilitarian philosophy. Which is one reason I'm reluctant to wholeheartedly endorse Godfrey 's location, intensity, duration formulation.

I think you're correctly connecting the issues, and I don't like "the greatest good for the greatest number," but I am not ready to throw out efforts to quantify pleasure as inherently inappropriate. Yes that seems to be with what the Benthamites were struggling with, but i don't know enough of their texts to say whether they got it wrong or not.

This issue of choosing among pleasures has to be articulated in some way other than saying "more pleasant" or "less pleasant" if we are to communicate to people what we are talking about. Because I can't conceive that anyone would say that "all pleasures are equal in every respect." If they are not equal in *every* respect, then do we not need to explore and articulate the differences?

[Quote from Don](#)

Regardless of the possible bread and water interpretation, I think this **is** what Epicurus taught. Know - at a gut level - what you absolutely need to live a self-sufficient, pleasurable life of well-being. Then you **know** if everything else was tragically taken from you, IF all other sources of (kinetic) pleasure were removed from you, you would still be able to lead a life of pleasure without pain on that. BUT he also taught to ENJOY the varieties of pleasure available to us here and now.

I think this is where France Wright was correct in framing the argument between Zeno and Epicurus, and Cicero was showing his intelligence by picking out the same issue: the question is "Does Epicurean philosophy leave the door wide open to **whatever** interpretation of pleasure one desires to make?"

Would indeed Epicurean philosophy have nothing to say between Lucretius at a young age (1) deciding to spend his life shepherding sheep on a hillside vs (2) deciding to become an epic poet and spending his life composing "On The Nature of Things?"

We can pose the question pretty easily: Lucretius as a lifelong shepherd living without pain would be at the exact same height of pleasure as Lucretius the Epic Poet living without pain. We can say that easily because our definitions of the hypothetical make them both "without pain" and therefore "at the height of pleasure."

What in Epicurean philosophy provides the guidance to the young Lucretius to tell him to pursue the life of the epic poet vs the life of the shepherd.

(I have nothing against shepherds -- just using them as a convenient paradigm example.)

I would say that even if we say that both lives are "without pain" and therefore the height of pleasure, we could say that one choice or the other would be "more pleasurable" in the specific case of Lucretius. If we can say that, we ought to be able to explain how, and why that choice would be appropriate for him, even though any pains involved in the life of an epic poet would be quite different from the pains confronting a shepherd.

If we simply say 'one option is more pleasurable and you simply have to figure it out for yourself' - that might be a viable answer. I am asking "Is that the best we can do to explain the choice?"

Post by "Pacatus" of November 19, 2023 at 1:23 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance." Yes.

I am hungry. In the moment, I can choose to assuage that particular hunger with either a piece of grilled fish or a slice of roast chicken (examples chosen randomly). If neither choice is likely to cause me any real pain, and it seems to me that either will assuage my current pain just as well, and if tasting food is a pleasure (as well as eating to assuage hunger) then on what possible basis – other than one seeming more pleasant to me in the moment – would I make a choice?

In such a case, I think that fish-or-chicken choice represents the variety of pleasures. But that's not something that I just shrug over and say "Meh. Either one." I choose based on which taste I prefer (would enjoy the most) at that moment. To talk about "disturbance" in this case seems to me a bit complicated and clunky, and my initial response would be "Huh?".

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 1:32 PM

Excellent practical application of the question, [Pacatus](#) !

My initial reaction to your post/question is "Not all choices are created equal." That may be a bit flippant, so I apologize if it comes off that way... but it's not far from what I want to get across.

You're going to have a feeling after making every choice you make. There's no getting around that. You're alive. You're feeling every tiny millisecond of your existence. Those feelings are going to be either pleasurable or painful (positive or negative). Plus there are innumerable other choices that led to your chicken/fish choice. Did you have chicken recently? Did you see something about a fish dish on TV just now that makes you slightly prefer that choice? Is it harder to heat up the chicken than the fish? ALL that goes into the choice.

If you choose the chicken, and, oops, it's gone bad... OH! I should have had the fish! You eat the chicken and "I'm still hungry. That wasn't as much as I thought it was." OR even "Wow, That was really good heated up! That exceeded my expectations."

Or the pain/pleasure feeling may be so miniscule you don't even think about it. You eat, and get on with your day.

Post by "Pacatus" of November 19, 2023 at 1:40 PM

[Don](#) :

So you are suggesting that my choices are always determined -- not by simple preference in the moment (an economist would say "at the margin"), but by unconscious elements? That seems both unnecessarily speculative and close to determinism, even if the determining causes are ones we are not (and perhaps cannot) be aware of.

+++++

I also want to add:

At some point, too much variety can cause anxiety over choice ("OMG, which among these thousands of toothpastes do I choose?!"), but to have some variety seems preferable to me - and on what basis could it be preferable other than it enhances pleasure? (Re the above: unless my preferences are determined.) Just as spice enhances the flavor of food - even if plain bread and water will assuage my pain. ("Variety is the spice of life.") And sometimes pondering and choosing itself can be pleasurable.

The whole thing might hinge (just thinking "out loud") on necessary versus unnecessary desires?

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 1:44 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

So you are suggesting that my choices are always determined

Oh, I'm not saying that. However, many other previous choices provide the choices you are offered. I don't think the choices you make "in the moment" are determined. There may be a higher probability of predicting what you'll based on your past behavior, current emotional state, previous choices, etc. But once a decision is made, those other branches are pruned, leading down a path to other decisions. The environment within which those other decisions are made is made by the choices you make now and in the future.

PS. I could chart decisions over years that brought me to be here, typing this response to you, right now. But I don't think those previous decisions were predetermined... Or at least I don't *feel* they were predetermined.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 19, 2023 at 1:51 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

However, many other previous choices provide the choices you are offered. I don't think the choices you make "in the moment" are determined. There may be a higher probability of predicting what you'll based on your past behavior, current emotional state, previous choices, etc. But once a decision is made, those other branches are pruned, leading down a path to other decisions. The environment within which those other decisions are made is made by the choices you make now and in the future.

But that seems still a form of complex determinism -- just with branching chains of causation, each one sensitive to what came before: sensitivity to initial conditions. No choices are made sans some environmental conditions (why economists -- my background -- talk about "constrained choice").

Post by “Don” of November 19, 2023 at 1:55 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But that seems still a form of complex determinism -- just with branching chains of causation. No choices are made sans some environmental conditions (why economists -- my background -- talk about "constrained choice").

I think that, in broad strokes, is how life works. We may literally have infinite choices in each moment, but the choices we are most likely going to make in any given moment probably are constrained but our character, our philosophy of life, our social context, etc. Do I have the capacity to abandon my family and move to the woods? Sure. Will I choose to do that? Do I want to do that? No.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 19, 2023 at 2:05 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I think that, in broad strokes, is how life works. We may literally have infinite choices in each moment, but the choices we are most likely going to make in any given moment probably are constrained but our character, our philosophy of life, our social context, etc. Do I have the capacity to abandon my family and move to the woods? Will I choose to do that? Do I want to do that? No.

I'm not sure yet whether I disagree. 🤔

Do we choose? Yes.

Do we ever make choices that are not constrained by circumstance, resources, personal history, intellectual/emotional development, etc.? No.

That is why so-called "libertarian free will" fails: Given all those conditions, there is no basis to think I could have ever "chosen differently" in exactly the same case -- unless choice reduces to randomness, which I think not.

Does any of that change how I think of pleasurable alternatives, or variety in choice? No. But variety can be thought of (thinking "out loud" again) as simply loosening the choice constraints. And that offers more options for pleasure. (Though I still think that sometimes the activity of choosing itself -- which entails having alternatives -- can be pleasurable in itself.)

Post by "Pacatus" of November 19, 2023 at 2:19 PM

Pleasurable as this discussion is, it is starting to remind me of the story in his *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein is discussing epistemology in the garden with another philosopher, and the man points to a tree and says: "That is, in fact, a tree. I **know** it's a tree! I can say **I know** it's a tree!"

At that moment, Wittgenstein notices that a passerby has stopped and looks at them with a confused expression. And Wittgenstein says to him: "Don't worry. This fellow's not insane. We're just doing philosophy." 😊 😄

And I'm **pretty sure** we're not insane! 🤔

Post by "Pacatus" of November 19, 2023 at 2:40 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Oh, no, no. Once you start down pain and pleasure "units" - dolores and hedons - you've left Epicurean philosophy and are talking Utilitarian philosophy.

I forgot this, and just wanted to say that, although Utilitarianism influenced neoclassical economics (efficient choice based on "marginal utility"), the notion of cardinal utility ("utils") was dropped. Constrained choice, based on relative preference, became the model. And in no way am I advocating for that former utilitarian position.

Post by "Cassius" of November 19, 2023 at 3:14 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Those feelings are going to be either pleasurable or painful (positive or negative).

But within "pleasurable" and "painful" are there not obviously *degrees* or pleasurable or painful? And are we not going to choose those pleasures which we find to be more pleasurable than others?

Saying that 100% pleasure is the height of pleasure is one thing, but is "height" the same for everyone in all circumstances? 100% is, yes, but what if two vessels that are 100% full are different sizes? Are the different sizes and therefore quantities and qualities of pleasures they contain of no relevance?

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

I forgot this, and just wanted to say that, although Utilitarianism influenced neoclassical economics (efficient choice based on "marginal utility"), the notion of cardinal utility ("utils") was dropped. Constrained choice, based on relative preference, became the model. And in no way am I advocating for that former utilitarian position.

I haven't read far enough into this to know the history, and I am not sure that I have the time to go there. But you're not stating why the notion of "cardinal utility" was dropped, and I suspect I am in agreement that "cardinal utility" is indeed something worthy of discussion that should not be dropped. If "relative preference" is a reference to how "other people" view pleasure and that

leads to "the greatest good for the greatest number," then I would say that is the erroneous track, and the right track is to indeed analyze what "for you" brings you the greatest pleasure.

I think we're still on the same initial question. Some pleasures are more pleasing to me/you/everyone than others, correct, and should we not discuss the reasoning as to why that is the case?

Post by "Pacatus" of November 19, 2023 at 4:19 PM

Cardinal utility was unusable because nobody could figure out how to measure/calculate "utils" (Don's hedons and dolors) as units of utility.

Relative preference is from the viewpoint of the individual. Given cost and resource constraints, how will a rational agent choose among the options (preferences) s/he faces? That, of course, is problematic of itself (including the whole notion of what "rational" means -- edit: in neoclassical economics it has to do with "efficiency" defined in terms of utility maximization -- Ugh!).

The purpose of the analysis is as a theoretical framework - to which empirical testing can be applied - for analyzing how people (consumers) generally make decisions.

Look, I am not defending neoclassical microeconomics. I had philosophical problems with it when I was in grad school, and left it behind. I'm just doing my best to give an explanation within a brief space. And just wanted to point out that, within economics as a social science, that notion of units of pleasure/happiness (cardinal utility) - whether hedons, dolors or utils - was really let go. (If you find a way to calculate such units, there is a Nobel prize awaiting you. 😊)

And "the greatest good for the greatest number" has always seemed simplistic to me, at best. I think that social welfare is an idea worth addressing, but it is fraught with nuance and subject to broad, especially political, disagreement. I have offered thoughts on it here before. I am content to now think that my responses do not require me to eschew Epicurean philosophy at any turn (Dr. Boeri, and our discussions around his thesis, was most helpful for me on that).

Post by "Godfrey" of November 19, 2023 at 5:00 PM

Just thinking over intensity, location and duration:

If Lucretius was deciding between spending a life as a shepherd or spending it writing didactic poetry, how would intensity, duration and duration apply? I tend to think of this breakdown in terms of maximizing overall pleasure. In this case:

- Duration for each choice is basically the same: his lifetime. He may consider that he can write poetry into old age, whereas he may not be able to herd sheep once his physical abilities decline. He could also compare whether one lifestyle would provide opportunities for more varieties of pleasure, whereas one might take up all of his waking hours.

- I think of location as referring to where in the body/mind feeling is experienced. It is interior to the body/mind, not something external. He could look at the physical (this is a location) pleasures and pains of being outside v being inside (outside v inside wouldn't be considered "location", but a particular external variable) in terms of how the pleasure of basking in the sun or the pain of being in the wind and rain. He may consider the mental pleasures of, say unfocused daydreaming or stream of consciousness philosophizing of a shepherd, or the mental pleasure of gathering knowledge of sheep and nature firsthand. He might compare this to the rigorous mental pleasure or pain of studying philosophy and composing verse.

- As to intensity, he may feel that he could experience much more intense pleasure with the poetic life, and a less intense pleasure with the life of a shepherd. He can then think about whether he prefers more or less intensity in this particular regard.

So thinking in terms of intensity, location and duration provides a framework for evaluating pleasures. I don't see this as a mathematical process of adding up hedons and dolons. It's an intuitive way of looking more specifically at what brings you pleasure or pain. A person may attempt to quantify from this, but that's pretty much beside the point. Even more, trying to count pleasure tokens seems to me to be counterproductive.

I don't know if I just clarified or mudding the issue....

Post by “Don” of November 19, 2023 at 5:20 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Does any of that change how I think of pleasurable alternatives, or variety in choice? No. But variety can be thought of (thinking "out loud" again) as simply loosening the choice constraints. And that offers more options for pleasure. (Though I still think that sometimes the activity of choosing itself -- which entails having alternatives -- can be pleasurable in itself.)

I can concur with that.

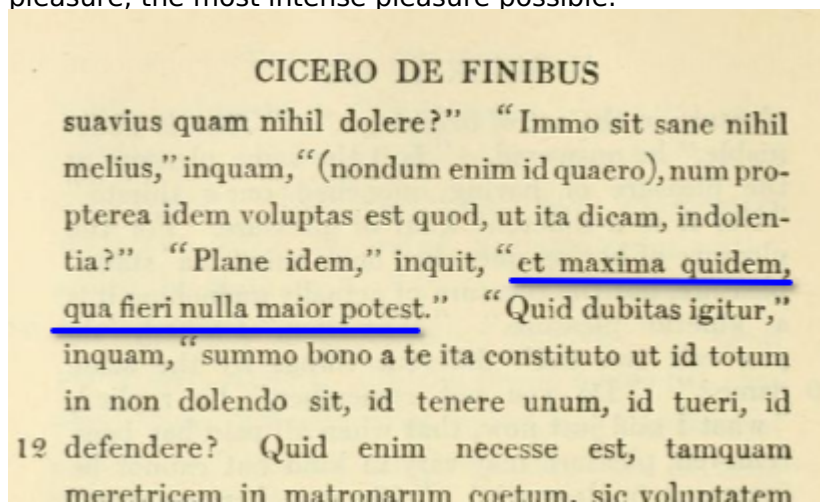
Post by "Cassius" of November 19, 2023 at 8:08 PM

I think it could be fruitful to look at the words being translated as "intensity" to see if they might perhaps be more related to issues of quantity or limit rather than what we might term "sharpness" or "depth of feeling."

I see, for example, that one of the phrases currently on the top of the forum uses the word intensity:

On Ends Book 2, III - Rackham / Loeb

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."



ere is "maxima"

... and given our discussions lately I think we need to be careful about how we are interpreting what "maximum pleasure" refers to.

It seems to me that it is easy to understand that if we are talking about "all our awareness" then if 100% of our awareness is engaged in feeling pleasure, then that would be the limit of pleasure.

However (and this of course the point we are discussing now) if there are various types of pleasure, and we aren't specifying whether 100% of our awareness is occupied with fingernail clipping or joy of mind in conversing with our friends, then we need to be aware that there might be varying types of maximum pleasure.

Again this is easy to see I think in regard to thinking about the example that Epicurus on his last day was experiencing both pleasure (of mind) and pain (of body) and offsetting one against the other. We're constantly in day to day life offsetting pleasures against pain. There is no 'salvation' or "sum of it all" moment in which everything gets added up to a "final" tally. It seems to me that there is no "Total absence of pain" except as a thought construction that doesn't happen unless you sit around thinking about your life in summary, and doesn't exist except in your conceptualization of it.

So if Epicurus was equating "absence of pain" with "pleasure" he was likely referring at least as much to everyday discrete experiences as he was to some theoretical summary of a person's life (if indeed he ever thought in those terms at all).

If all or a significant part of this reasoning is true, then I think that when we do choose to talk about 100% pleasure = total absence of pain we should be talking about discrete "slices of life," and that would mean that "absence of pain," even though described as 100% and therefore at a maximum of quantity, is saying nothing regarding the quality of what I think most of us mean when we use the word "intensity."

At the hazard of this being a tangent I am reminded of color controls on a television (at least old style CRT TVs I grew up with). Televisions have controls for Color/Hue, Saturation and Brightness. Is there a possible analogy that "pure pleasure" is like "pure yellow" in that it is 100% yellow? The yellow control may be set at 100% yellow, yet the various settings of "saturation" and "brightness" of the yellow make the different settings readily distinguishable. So my question to throw out there would be:

When PD09 refers to "intensity," location, and duration, are we talking about how pleasures differ from one another and how saying "absence of pain = 100% pleasure" does not tell us all we need to know about which pleasure to choose?

PD09. If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted, and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another. [3]

Edit: I am saying several things in this post so let me separate them:

(1) I am doubting that "intensity" is the best word for us to use in saying that "the total absence of pain is the most intense pleasure." Most people don't translate PD03 as saying "the most intense pleasure is the absence of pain," they say "limit of quantity of pleasure." Seems to me that the more likely analogy is that "the total absence of pain is the "purest" pleasure, and

whether we perceive it to be the most "intense feeling " needs to be a subject of discussion over what "intense" really means. I doubt most people consider "intense" feeling to be the same as the most "pure" feeling.

(2) The related point is that when the Epicureans were making statements to the effect that "the highest pleasure is the total absence of pain" that word "highest" is not meant to imply that there is an absolute scale of pleasure that everyone experiences in the same way. What is highest for one person may be totally different for another person, and whether we are talking about "ataraxia" or "the highest pleasure" status for even a single person may be different for that same person at different times and circumstances (and therefore we should act accordingly to distinguish and pursue the type we feel to be most pleasurable to us).

Maybe this all resolves down to the question: "Is 'the limit of pleasure' the same experience for everyone?" Maybe the answer to that is clearly no, and I am simply feeling the need to make the issue clear because I am under the continuing influence of the religious and romantic and egalitarian idea that everyone has access to the same type of "salvation experience" basking in the presence of god." At this point in my efforts to apply Epicurus' views consistently, I cannot imagine that he held that to be the case, but the issue seems so important that this conclusion should not be left to implication.

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 10:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But within "pleasurable" and "painful" are there not obviously degrees or pleasurable or painful? And are we not going to choose those pleasures which we find to be more pleasurable than others?

In thinking about this, if we're making a choice about something we've never done before, there is no way for us to know which choice we would find more pleasurable. We can predict which choice we *think* would bring us more pleasure, but what are we basing this one. Previous experience - both our own personal experience and that knowledge that we've gleaned from seeing or reading about others' experiences - is really the only criteria we can use.

I'm not sure what this implies, but I find it interesting when we (we all) say things like "We make choices that will bring us more pleasure." It seems we should probably say "We make choices that we believe will bring us more pleasure in the long run or the short term."

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 11:13 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the question is "Does Epicurean philosophy leave the door wide open to *whatever* interpretation of pleasure one desires to make?"

For Epicurus, pleasure is simply that feeling which is not painful derived from actions or states which do not result in struggle, distress, anxiety, pain, etc. Additionally, Pleasure comes in two "flavors" - that which is felt in a state of rest ; that which consists in motion and activity.

What seems to get interpreted is the activity *leading to* pleasure and *the consequences flowing from* pleasure. I think that's also why the pleasure from states is so important because it's source is a state of existence and not an action (something kinetic) and there are really no consequences other than continued pleasure in the state. Plus, we always have access to the pleasure deriving from a state of existence if we only will experience it.

I'm going to quote the letter to Menoikeus with some emphasis:

Quote

[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. For the sake of this, we do everything in order to neither be in bodily or mental pain nor to be in fear or dread; and so, when once this has come into being around us, it sets free all of the calamity, distress, and suffering of the mind, seeing that the living being has no need to go in search of something that is lacking for the good of our mental and physical existence. For it is then that we need pleasure, if we were to be in pain from the pleasure not being present; but if we were to not be in pain, we no longer desire or beg for pleasure. And this is why we say pleasure is the foundation and fulfillment of the blessed life. [129] Because we perceived pleasure as a fundamental good and common to our nature, and so, as a result of this, we begin every choice and rejection against this, judging every good thing by the standard of **how that pleasure affects us or how we react to considering experiencing that pleasure.** And because pleasure is the fundamental and inborn good, this is why not every pleasure is seized and we pass by many pleasures when greater unpleasant things were to result for us as a result: and we think many pains better than pleasures whenever greater pleasure were to follow for a longer time by patiently abiding the pain. [130] So, all pleasure, through its nature, belongs to us as a good; however, not all are elected; and just as all pains are entirely evil by their nature, so not all are always to be shunned. **It is proper**

when judging these things to consider what is advantageous and what is not advantageous for you; in other words (i.e., what the consequences will be).

We consult the consequences of our actions; because, on the one hand, pleasure over time can lead to pain; and on the other hand, pain can lead to pleasure.

It seems to me that Epicurus is a [consequentialist](#). The "correct" choice to make is based on the consequences of that choice.

Or did you have something entirely different in mind when you used "interpretation"? I suppose should have asked before I went off half-cocked.

Post by "Don" of November 19, 2023 at 11:23 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

If Lucretius was deciding between spending a life as a shepherd or spending it writing didactic poetry, how would intensity, duration and duration apply? I tend to think of this breakdown in terms of maximizing overall pleasure. In this case:

In thinking more about your intensity, duration, and location schema, it seems Epicurus himself endorses your idea of applying time/duration to pleasure and how we make our choices:

Quote from Letter to Herodotus

We must chiefly reflect upon that to which ***we attach this peculiar character of time***, and by which we measure it. [73] No further proof is required : we have only to reflect that we attach the attribute of time to days and nights and their parts, and likewise to feelings of pleasure and pain and to neutral states, to states of movement and states of rest, conceiving a peculiar accident of these to be this very characteristic which we express by the word `time.' [He says this both in the second book "On Nature" and in the Larger Epitome.]

So, Epicurus states that we DO apply the characteristic of "time" to the feelings of pleasure and pain and to neutral states, to states of movement and states of rest (δὲ καὶ τοῖς πάθει καὶ ταῖς ἀπαθείαις, καὶ κινήσει καὶ στάσειν). Now, I'm not sure what we are to glean from the translation referring to a "neutral state" ἀπαθείαις (apatheiais) because that's not one of the two feelings of pleasure: κινήσει and στάσειν. But that might have to wait for another thread. What I wanted to point out that your duration criteria does appear to have a precedent from Epicurus himself.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 19, 2023 at 11:58 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

When [PD09](#) refers to "intensity," location, and duration, are we talking about how pleasures differ from one another and how saying "absence of pain = 100% pleasure" does not tell us all we need to know about which pleasure to choose?

[PD09](#). If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted, and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another.

I think that the answer to this question must be "Yes!" If you want to describe an ethics of pleasure, you need to go into detail as to how to work with pleasure. You can't stop at "absence of pain = 100% pleasure", which is overarching and somewhat abstract.

Epicurus, as far as I can tell, developed at least three methods to approach a personal ethics of pleasure:

- 1) understand the difference between desires and pleasures, and work with the three categories of desires
- 2) examine the attributes of your various pleasures using intensity, location and duration
- 3) understand and work with katastematic and kinetic pleasures (which is difficult, given the dearth of texts on the matter)

These methods are *not* mutually exclusive, and in fact are mutually supportive. Or at least that's my current take.

[Quote from Don](#)

For Epicurus, pleasure is simply that feeling which is not painful derived from actions or states which do not result in struggle, distress, anxiety, pain, etc. Additionally, Pleasure comes in two "flavors" - that which is felt in a state of rest; that which consists in motion and activity.

I would add to this as per my comments above. Also, I'm not sure that I agree with "simply" in the above quote, [Don](#) . Some pleasures do involve various pains, but the resultant pleasure outweighs the pain involved in obtaining the pleasure (I think we all agree on that). I *think* what

you're describing is pleasure resulting from natural and necessary desires.

[Quote from Don](#)

Now, I'm not sure what we are to glean from the translation referring to a "neutral state" ἀπαθείαις (apatheiais) because that's not one of the two feelings of pleasure: κινήσεις and στάσεις. But that might have to wait for another thread.

Could it be that, early on, Epicurus had not yet settled on the idea of no neutral state? If so, could this give a rough idea of the approximate date the letter? (Just a thought for another thread.)

Post by “Don” of November 20, 2023 at 12:12 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Some pleasures do involve various pains

I can't endorse that. The feeling of pleasure is pleasure and feeling of pain is pain.

If you're saying "Some overall pleasurable activities involve various pains," then, yes, I can endorse that. Riding on a roller coast for some is partly exhilarating and partly terrifying, but the "terror in a controlled environment" is part of the pleasure.

And we know that we have to undergo some pain (ex., exercise) for future pleasure (ex., better health, longer life hopefully). I have no problem with that scenario.

What I'm objecting to (and objecting is probably too strong of a word here) is that the feeling of pleasure itself is not mixed with pain. We can experience some pleasure and some pain in different parts of our body (or maybe even different parts of our mind?) but there is no such thing as pleasure/pain in one feeling.

That's what I meant by "simply."

Post by “Don” of November 20, 2023 at 12:15 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Could it be that, early on, Epicurus had not yet settled on the idea of no neutral state? If so, could this give a rough idea of the approximate date the letter? (Just a thought for another thread.)

That's a possibility. If I knew that was there, I had forgotten about it. 😊 I'll have to dig in a little more on that "neutral state" (apatheia, a + patheia = "no feeling") comment... unless someone else can chime in! Please do!

Post by “Godfrey” of November 20, 2023 at 12:31 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

And we know that we have to undergo some pain (ex., exercise) for future pleasure (ex., better health, longer life hopefully). I have no problem with that scenario.

That's specifically what I was referring to. It sounds like we're in agreement; I got thrown off by "simply" 👍

Post by “Titus” of February 19, 2024 at 9:23 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"You have said Ataraxia is desirable. Is all Ataraxia the same?" How should I consider any differences in the experience of ataraxia in determining how I am going to live my life? Does the pleasantness of my experiences while I am not disturbed have anything to do with it? Am I supposed to consider the location, duration, and intensity of pleasures, or are all pleasures of equal significance to me so long as I am not disturbed?

How would you articulate the answer to that question to someone?

Have we already discussed [PD 18](#)? There, Epicurus states **after reaching the quantitative maximum of pleasure it only differs in quality.**

It seems to me, as long as I am mentally undisturbed and in a state of corporeal well-being, pleasurable sensations are "adding up" as an optional **seasoning**. This may be practically addressed in [PD 29](#), where the natural but not necessary category of pleasures addresses also a qualitative matter. We can find relieve from thirst by simply drinking water or we could also spice our experience e.g. with additional flavour to our drink, heating or cooling it.

I think we also have to take into respect, that this is not only a theoretical discussion of ideas, but of experiences that are fundamental to our being. The idea of fulfilling natural and necessary needs while sitting in a cave by drinking water and eating bread is a state of idealized sanctification. While it focuses on the relatively low hardware requirements concerning human material needs, it ignores all the other variables to our lives in our ever-changing material conditions.

While the natural but not necessary entities are somewhat "optional", they reflect our interaction with our environment. There we have to make decisions continuously. So while ataraxia seems to me somewhat equal as a comparable term, it is also confronted by a physical reality that has to be addressed by personal choices and avoidances.

Post by "Cassius" of February 19, 2024 at 9:34 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

I think we also have to take into respect, that this is not only a theoretical discussion of ideas, but of experiences that are fundamental to our being. The idea of fulfilling natural and necessary needs while sitting in a cave by drinking water and eating bread **is a state of idealized sanctification**. While it focuses on the relatively low hardware requirements concerning human material needs, it ignores all the other variables to our lives in our ever-changing material conditions.

I totally agree.

However I will comment further because it's hard for me to think of describing "sitting in a cave drinking water and eating bread" as a state of "idealized sanctification."

While there are definitely times and places in world history where sitting in a cave and subsisting on bread and water would be exactly the right course of conduct, doing as some do and setting up such states of existence as not only desirable, but the highest life desirable for a

human being, would be better described in my view as "supremely stupid."

And yet there are religions and philosophies that (at least allegorically) do exactly that.

Post by "Don" of February 19, 2024 at 11:33 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

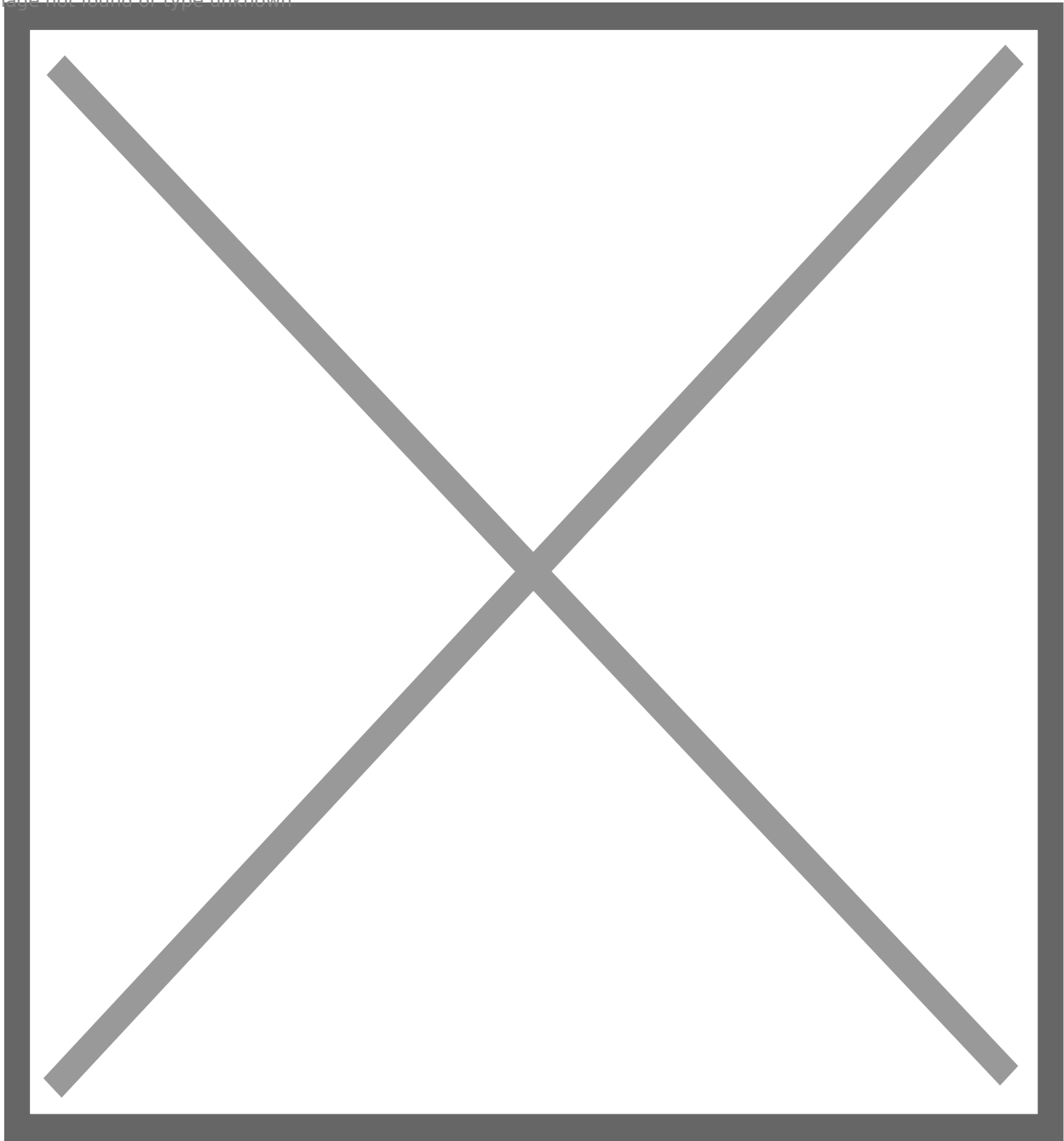
The idea of fulfilling natural and necessary needs while sitting in a cave by drinking water and eating bread is a state of idealized sanctification. While it focuses on the relatively low hardware requirements concerning human material needs, it ignores all the other variables to our lives in our ever-changing material conditions.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

While there are definitely times and places in world history where sitting in a cave and subsisting on bread and water would be exactly the right course of conduct, doing as some do and setting up such states of existence as not only desirable, but the highest life desirable for a human being, would be better described in my view as "supremely stupid."

I feel the urge to address the "cave and bread" metaphor as it raises its head yet again. This is a favorite metaphor of Cassius's to illustrate the popular but misguided conception of Epicurean philosophy as ONLY satisfying the "natural and necessary" desires. As I understand it, the "cave" signifies the idea that Epicurus walled himself off from the world in the Garden, like some kind of medieval anchorite:

Image not found or type unknown



[Anchorites: Medieval Women And Men Walled Up Alive](#)

During the Middle Ages, thousands of women and men chose to be walled up alive. Read on to discover why anchorites were willingly immured.

www.thecollector.com

The popular "cave" isolation idea is simply wrong. The Garden, as I hope I've shown in my impromptu presentation and longer article available on the forum, wasn't isolated from Athenian society. The primary reason Epicurus taught in the Garden is that, as I understand, it

was private property and he could do what he wanted there. The gymnasiarchs and others had no control or authority over what he taught there. It was what we would call "a safe space." What happens in the Garden stays in the Garden, to riff on a Vegas ad campaign. But that doesn't mean it was "cut off" or walled off from society (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*)... but I digress.

The "bread" is taken as literal instructions on how to live from the Letter to Menoikeus and other snippets taken out of context. I addressed the "maza (barley bread or porridge) and spring water" in my Menoikeus commentary to my satisfaction at least... but I am but a lone voice crying in the wilderness... (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*)

To take one random example of this conception, here's one of the first results in a web search on [Epicurus live on bread]

<https://classicalwisdom.com/people/philosophers/epicurus-proto-scientist-secular-saint-and-sophisticated-hedonist/>

Quote

Just as important to the Epicurean ethic is *a reduction of desires. If we want less, we will be happy with less.* The Epicurean path to happiness is not a result of an excess of external pleasures or material goods. Live simply, and without an excess of wealth or luxury, says Epicurus, and with that proclamation he very well may lay claim to the title of "first western minimalist!" Moderation, temperance, and cheerfulness are Epicurean virtues; unbridled luxury and feverish desire Epicurean vices.

From my readings, Epicurus does want us to look at our desires practically and with discretion. This website's "*If we want less, we will be happy with less*" is *almost* right, in my opinion. I would expand that to say "In times of want, we will be happy with less because we understand that we don't require - it is not a necessity - to have luxuries or even variety in all circumstances if we recognize the pleasure right in front of us. However, if we have the opportunity to partake of luxuries and variety with a minimum of stress, enjoy them! But don't think you *need* them to have a sense of well-being in your life." But that's a little wordy for a breezy podcast website!

I realize the "cave and bread and water" metaphor is a convenient shorthand for this on-going, perpetual, bang-one's-head-against-the-wall frustration with most/many popular and academic takes on Epicurus and his school and philosophy. That is exactly one of the reasons I like and recommend Dr. Emily Austin's *Living for Pleasure* so highly! I think she got it exactly right...but again... voice, Wilderness, (*insert disgruntled frustrated noise here*).

Post by "Cassius" of February 19, 2024 at 12:29 PM

Great post and thank you for the link to Anchorites! Never seen that before, and that's very helpful as an illustration of how supremely stupid people can be.