

# Scientific Support for Psychological Hedonism

Post by “kochiekoch” of April 19, 2024 at 1:43 PM

Hi all! 😊

Psychological hedonism, the theory that humans are motivated by pleasure and the avoidance of pain, is supposed to be our 20th discussion topic, so I thought I'd do some research. Years ago, I read there was actual scientific evidence supporting this concept; so I did a quick search and came up with this item confirming the idea.

From the US government of all places! 😄

[Hedonism and the choice of everyday activities - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

>>There are many factors that influence our everyday activities—from financial considerations to social norms to political constraints—yet most theories of motivation have highlighted the crucial role played by negative and positive affective states (4-6). In particular, human behavior is believed to be guided by the hedonic principle, according to which our choices of activities aim to minimize negative affect and maximize positive affect (7).

The hedonic principle has been tested empirically through laboratory studies that have used a wide variety of mood induction techniques (e.g., writing about negative or positive life events, watching sad or happy movies) and then asked individuals to choose among various activities.<<

The article is mainly about how people are most likely to compensate for bad moods, pleasure, and how likely they are to do disagreeable tasks, when in a good mood.

Very Epicurean! 😊

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Post by “Cassius” of April 19, 2024 at 2:55 PM

Thanks Steve!

One of the things we want to discuss too is how this applies to people like Plato or Aristotle or Cicero.

Is it fair to also label them "psychological hedonists?"

Does this label explain anything helpful to distinguishing between Epicurus and Plato?

Does the meaning of "hedonism," especially one's definition of "hedonism / pleasure," make any difference to the analysis?

If everyone is in fact a "psychological hedonist," does the label help in some way to answer questions about disputes when the opponent denies that he is acting for pleasure?

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## Post by "kochiekoch" of April 19, 2024 at 5:54 PM

Hallo!

Lots of good questions here that set me doing some research. 🤔

>>One of the things we want to discuss too is how this applies to people like Plato or Aristotle or Cicero.

Is it fair to also label them "psychological hedonists?"<<

Yes. For one thing, psychological hedonism is part and parcel of human nature. As shown scientifically in the article posted. And these guys were definitely human. 😊

Secondly, they seem to both promote eudemonia. Plato, I understand through self-awareness and moral virtue, Cicero, through his promotion of virtue. Both as ends in themselves, although leading to eudemonia. (The REAL end here). 😊

>>Does this label explain anything helpful to distinguishing between Epicurus and Plato?<<

It does. For Epicurus, it's a more direct path through nature. For Plato it's a more mystical and convoluted path through his imaginary world: creating "self-awareness" and moral virtue, ending in eudemonia.

>>Does the meaning of "hedonism," especially one's definition of "hedonism / pleasure," make any difference to the analysis?<<

It does. Plato is only seeing pleasure in bodily stimulation. And he thinks it's a hindrance to eudemonia. Epicurus see's it as both bodily, and more importantly, mental pleasure.

>>If everyone is in fact a "psychological hedonist," does the label help in some way to answer questions about disputes when the opponent denies that he is acting for pleasure?<<

It does. The science shows everyone IS a psychological hedonist , and the science is what is empirically known. He or she may deny the science, like a creationist denying evolution, but that's what's actually true.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of April 20, 2024 at 11:28 AM**

[Quote from kochiekoch](#)

Years ago, I read there was actual scientific evidence supporting this concept; so I did a quick search and came up with this item confirming the idea.

From the US government of all places!



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### **Post by “Pacatus” of April 21, 2024 at 3:33 PM**

[Quote from kochiekoch](#)

The science shows everyone IS a psychological hedonist , and the science is what is empirically known. He or she may deny the science, like a creationist denying evolution, but that's what's actually true.

Or the Stoic denying that feeling pleasure at her accomplishments (a good self-pat on the back?) guides her pursuit of virtue?

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of April 21, 2024 at 7:23 PM**

I did not take good notes at last night's Zoom, and I can't remember very much about what was said...

Is psychological hedonism the same as saying "motivated by your own self-interest"?

And it doesn't say much about what should be the focus of your self-interest, or about the kinds of choices you make, and whether or not things work out to give you good results.

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## Post by “Don” of April 21, 2024 at 9:29 PM

[Hedonism \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

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## Post by “Don” of April 21, 2024 at 10:55 PM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Is psychological hedonism the same as saying "motivated by your own self-interest"?

I don't necessarily think working for one's self-interest is bad; however, I also don't see "psychological hedonism" as being defined that way. At least in my mind.

I would see it as closer to the [Britannica](#) definition: "the view that all human action is ultimately motivated by desires for pleasure and the avoidance of pain." That's what makes pleasure the summum bonum and the telos. It's *at the end* of every series of questions asking "Why did you do that?" To make up a contrived example:

- A: Why do you get up in the morning to go to work but still complain about your job (from time to time)?
- B: If I don't get up and go, I'll be fired.
- A: Why do you care if you get fired?
- B: If I get fired, I won't have a job and no money.
- A: Why do you want money?
- B: To buy what I need, like even the basics, food, shelter, and all that.
- A: Why do you need all that?
- B: Well, I'll be out on the street and hungry.
- ....and so on... Until B admits that it feels good to be without the pain of hunger and to have the pleasure of security.

We may not be conscious of every action's motivation ultimately lying in pleasure (positive affect to use the psychological emotional circumplex: Pleasant affect = what Epicurus calls pleasure Unpleasant= what Epicurus calls pain), but the human urge to seek out

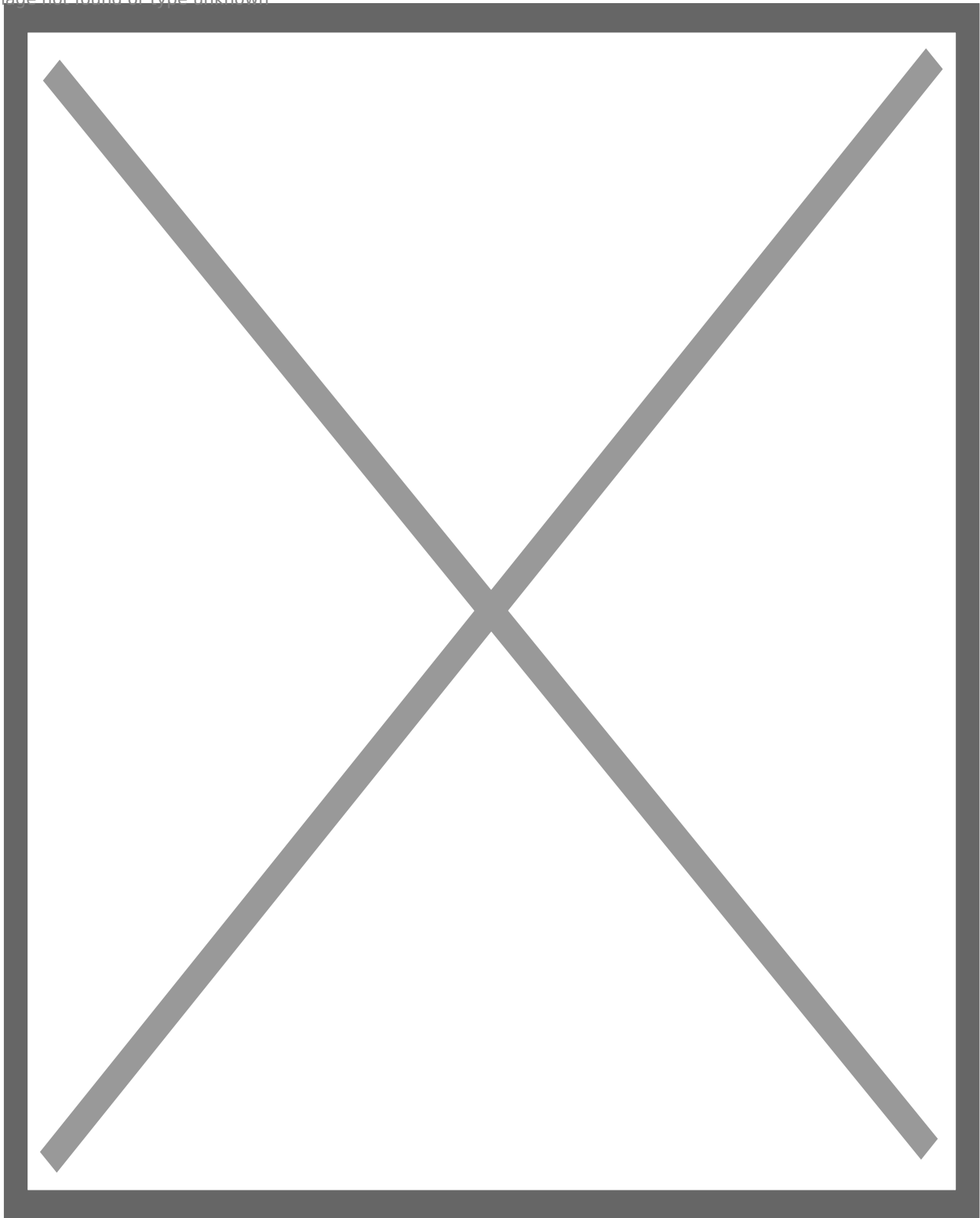
pleasure/positive affect and avoid pain/negative affect/ is present in ALL life forms, even plants move toward sunlight and food sources and amoebas seek out food and avoid dangers to their existence. Humans have just done a better job of hiding that most basic drive away and covering it over with justifications, rationalizations, etc.

Someone who says they do something because it's virtuous ultimately has to admit ... LOL, well they don't have to admit it... that it makes them feel good... it's pleasurable to them... to act virtuously. And so on.

The "self-interest" part can be selfish altruism. If I treat others well, I hope in turn that they will treat me well. And treating people well and kindly gives me pleasure; results in positive affect. If I treat others poorly, I will experience negative affect... I may be paranoid or anxious that someone will "get even" and so on.

See also:

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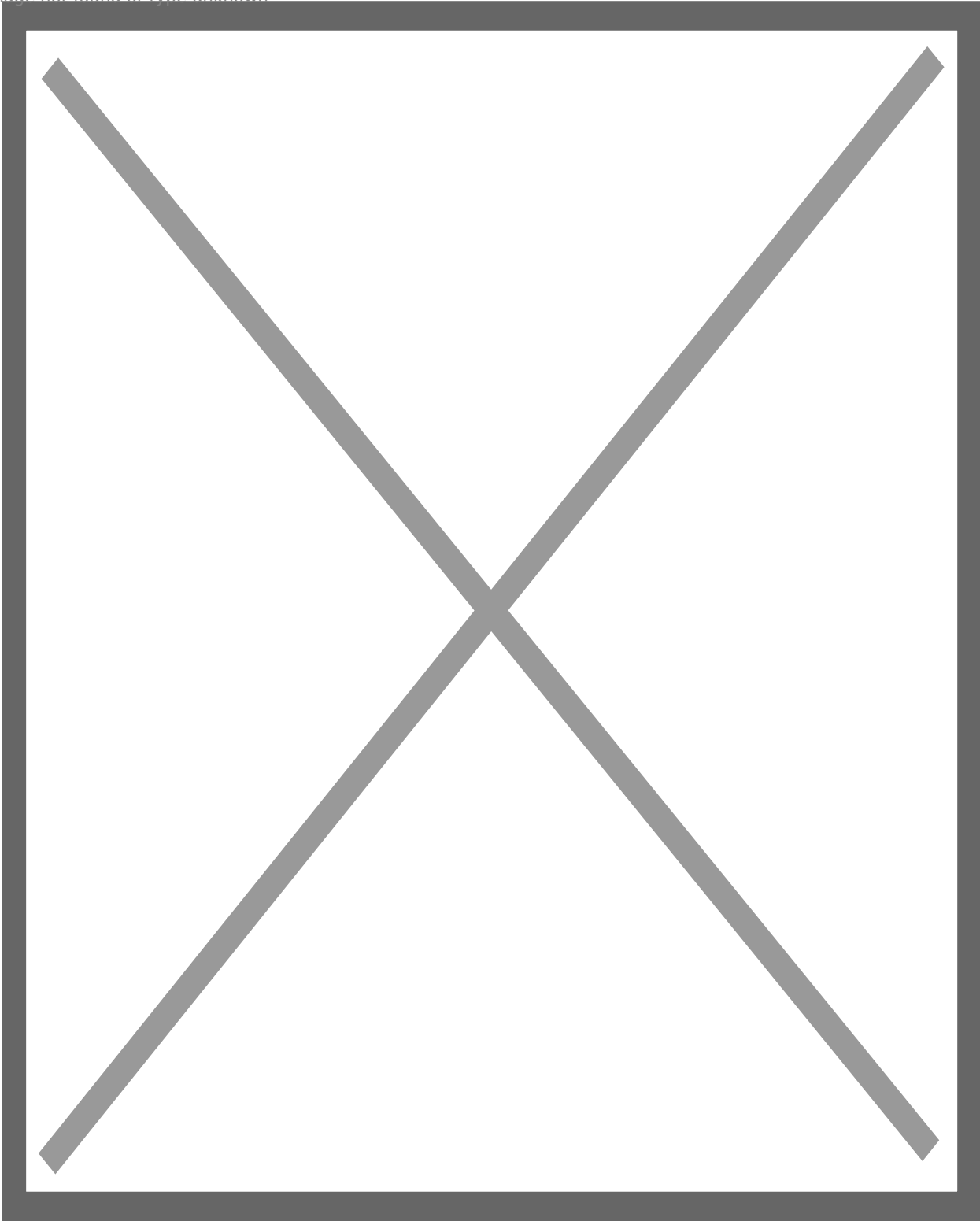
[The Selfishness of Altruism](#)

Embracing the essence of helping.

www.psychologytoday.com

"there really is no such thing as a completely "selfless" act."

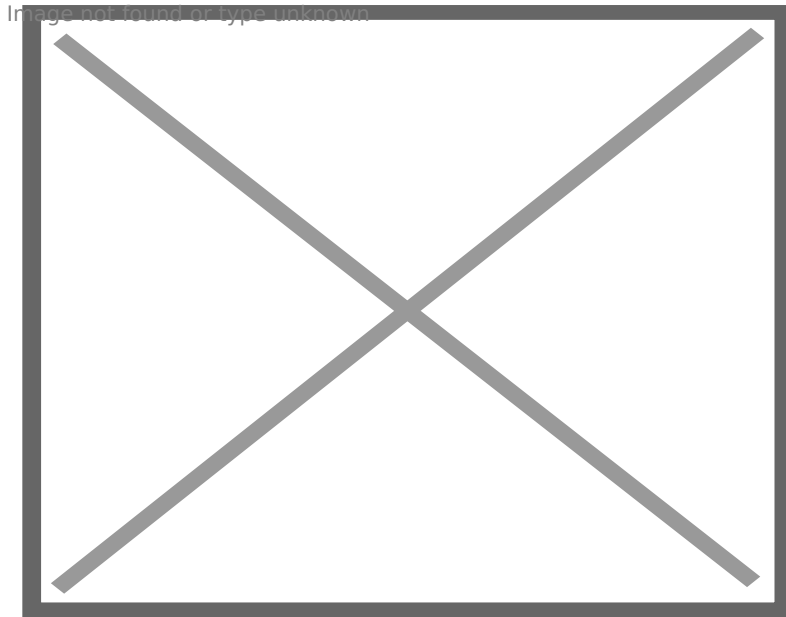
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### [The Selfishness of Altruism](#)

Here's why you try to "help" whether or not it helps.

[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)



### [Frontiers | Healthy Selfishness and Pathological Altruism: Measuring Two Paradoxical Forms of Selfishness](#)

Selfishness is often regarded as an undesirable or even immoral characteristic, whereas altruism is typically considered universally desirable and virtuous. ...

[www.frontiersin.org](http://www.frontiersin.org)

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#### **Post by “kochiekoch” of April 22, 2024 at 9:48 AM**

Right. Self-interest is a broad term, it might encompass a whole host of motivations, like the financial, social and the political motivations mentioned in the top article, but it all can be reduced down to hedonism.

Self-interest to do what? 😊

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#### **Post by “A\_Gardner” of April 22, 2024 at 1:33 PM**

I know I haven't been able to post often here, as life has been incredibly busy, so I feel a little guilty that this would be one of my first posts in quite awhile, but, c'est la vie!

I enjoyed this exchange and appreciate the research you have put in, but my only quibble with this is setting up science as in the manner you have here. We have to remember that science only provides enough information in the sense that we can observe that something happens with enough frequency and order to declare it reliably accurate.

Not an absolute truth or known.

Forgive my quibbling as well, as it's not personal, but Scientism is something that can easily creep into our search for pleasure (nay, all stated end goals of various philosophical schools) if we let it.

#### [Quote from kochiekoch](#)

It does. The science shows everyone IS a psychological hedonist , and the science is what is empirically known. He or she may deny the science, like a creationist denying evolution, but that's what's actually true.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 22, 2024 at 2:01 PM**

A\_Gardner reminded me of something else that I wanted to be sure to add to this thread, on the issue of whether Epicurus would consider the term "psychological hedonism" as something he would use to promote his own philosophy.

As I think was noted by Fernando in our discussion in a Wednesday Zoom, there is quite a difference between saying "all living things do pursue what they consider to lead to their greatest pleasure," as against "all living things should pursue what they find pleasurable to them." The latter is closer to Epicurus, but even that has something else that in my view overshadows the whole issue:

Even more important in my view is that I don't think that Epicurus made the observation that living things "do" pursue pleasure except in the case of "the young of all species" which he clearly delimited by saying "before they become corrupted."

Quote from On Ends Book One

[30] "Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions."

It strikes me essential to remember that it is core and crucial Epicureanism that intelligent beings like humans have the power of free will, and we can become corrupted and choose NOT to follow Nature and NOT to pursue pleasure -- our decisions can be perverted and biased and affected by other considerations, such as pursuing "virtue" or pursuing "the will of the gods."

As far as I am concerned the jury is still out on when and where discussion of a term like "psychological hedonism" may be helpful. But I am convinced that discussion of that term without discussing Epicurus' real position -- that humans DO NOT always pursue pleasure as their supreme good and DO NOT always recoil from pain as their supreme evil.

The sources of corruption in human affairs are very strong, and it would be perverse to ignore that those sources of corruption often do lead people to pursue other goals which are not in fact their own greater pleasure. If Epicurus had not thought that were true, there would have been no reason at all for his philosophy.

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### **Post by “kochiekoch” of April 22, 2024 at 2:37 PM**

Hi there A\_G! 😊

You raise a good and valid point. You don't want to call the findings of science absolute truths. Especially since new information arises and even the example I gave of evolution isn't absolute but always changing as we learn more. Although the data is pretty solid in support for both evolution and psychological hedonism.

But saying it was "actually true", implying that it was an absolute truth, was a bit strong on my part. Thanks for the correction. 😊

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### **Post by “Don” of April 23, 2024 at 12:10 AM**

I would agree that a term like "psychological hedonism" is only helpful up to a point. The "truth" - if we want to call it that - to me remains that...

**All living beings** move toward those stimuli that produce positive/pleasurable/growth-enhancing effects move away from stimuli that produce negative/painful effects.

- "Pain is different from pure *nociception*, the process of being able to detect and move away from a toxic stimulus. But pain doesn't simply register in our awareness as a marker or sign of things we should avoid out in the world. It is an experience in itself, something that we subjectively feel." ([Source](#))

Which leads me to ponder: Epicurus used the term *pathe* to refer to pain and pleasure (per Diogenes Laertius) - Πάθη δὲ λέγουσιν εἶναι δύο, ἡδονὴν καὶ ἀλγηδόνα. They say the feelings (*pathe*) are two: pleasure (*hedonen*) and pain (*algedona*).

*Pathe*, at its most basic, is simply "what is done or what happens to a person." There is no evaluative feature, at its most basic, involved in *pathe*. It is literally "what is done or what happens to a person."

Which leads me to ask: Is Epicurus talking about basic *nociception* when he refers to pain? "Nociception provides a means of neural feedback that allows the central nervous system (CNS) to detect and avoid noxious and potentially damaging stimuli in both active and passive settings. The sensation of pain divides into four large types: acute pain, nociceptive pain, chronic pain, and neuropathic pain." ([Source](#))

I don't think so, at least not quite. We've talked before on this forum about pre-cognitive/pre-rational/pre-evaluative nature of the Canon, including *pathe*/feelings. I get the idea from reading the Epicurean texts that pleasure and pain come unbidden. We "experience" these feelings. They happen to us without our volition. We "experience" pleasure whether we want to or not. We "experience" pain whether we want to or not. That is the "truth" that Epicurus and the Epicureans are working with. The natural well-functioning of a living being is to feel positively/pleasure when something pleasant happens to us and to feel negatively/pain when something "noxious or potentially damaging" is happening to us.

Now, that doesn't mean we don't suffer from pain, but suffering is separate from the experience of pain. Experiments have been done where subjects can endure the "pain" of their hand in an ice bath longer if they're allowed to swear, curse, yell, howl, etc. If they're silent, they can't endure the pain as long. They "suffer" less if they're allowed to have agency in their behavior.

Furthermore (agreeing with [Cassius](#) above), humans have the unique ability to obfuscate and obstruct and corrupt the normal, well-functioning of the body and mind with rationalizations, dogmatic assertions, twisted ideals, empty unlimited desires, etc. It seems to me that Epicurus calls humans to get rid of all those obfuscations, obstructions, and corruptions and return to a normal, natural, healthy, well-functioning state.

That's where I come down on seeing pleasure as the telos/summum bonum/highest good. Everything a natural, well-functioning being does moves it away from "pain" and toward "pleasure." The motion is always - ultimately - toward positive stimuli, positive effects, and positive outcomes and away from "noxious or potentially damaging" stimuli, effects, and outcomes. Humans (and some animals) can "choose" to undergo hardship or pain in order to move - ultimately - to pleasure. Even a parent "choosing" to undergo pain or even death to protect their children is choosing pleasure in that they may find - even in their imagination - the prospect of not doing everything to protect their child unbearable. In fact, running into a burning building to certain death to try to save your child may very well be an application of "even on the rack, the wise one is content."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2024 at 6:23 AM**

I think I agree with everything there Don, and even the choice of words, with the possible exception of the very last word "content."

In describing what we would feel if we were running into a building to certain death to save our child, I don't know that I would describe it as "content" without more, but the meaning would be more like "confident that I had made the best choice among the agreeable (or less disagreeable) available alternatives." (With 'best' defined not in terms of "virtue" or "duties" or "goodness" or "piety" or "holiness" or "logic" but in terms of the dominance of pleasure over pain that I would anticipate experiencing depending upon the choice I decide to take.)

In evaluating why I say that, I think my concern is the one I always have in evaluating flatly-stated terms like content / satisfied / calm / tranquil. I see those terms as overused in the philosophical world by people who are attitudinally more Buddhist or Stoic and who base their perspectives on acceptance of fate and passivity in the face of forces they feel unable to control or influence, or duty-bound to follow. I don't think that is an Epicurean attitude, and I see that attitude as destructive to identifying the attitude toward life that led to the success of the ancient Epicureans.

If I were Epicurus running into the burning building I would not use any of those words to describe the emotions I would be experiencing at the many aspects of the situation. Very likely I would be hot with anger I might have against the circumstances that placed all of us in that position of needing to run into the building, especially if those circumstances were caused maliciously or recklessly by someone who acted improperly. (In many cases the circumstances could be purely accidental or other factors would change the situation, but we should not ignore the real possibility that the situation was caused by malicious forces deserving of anger.)

I wouldn't be content or calm or satisfied or tranquil while I was running to certain death in those circumstances, but for the very reasons that you state, "find[ing] - even in their imagination - the prospect of not doing everything to protect their child unbearable" - I would be "confident that I had made the best choice among the agreeable (or less disagreeable) available alternatives." I can make peace with using "content" in that context as part of the overall picture ("I am content that I did the best I could to choose among the available alternatives"), but I think in the current intellectual environment it probably makes sense to be clear about the full meaning of "content."

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### **Post by “Don” of April 23, 2024 at 7:11 AM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I would be "confident that I had made the best choice among the agreeable (or less disagreeable) available alternatives." I can make peace with using "content" in that context as part of the overall picture ("I am content that I did the best I could to choose among the available alternatives"), but I think in the current intellectual environment it probably makes sense to be clear about the full meaning of "content."

Well put. I can go with that, and that is the idea that I was getting at. I purposefully did not want to use "happy" because I don't want to use "happy" for eudaimonia. But your explanation shows how thorny of a problem it is trying to translate ideas across languages using a single word.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 23, 2024 at 7:39 AM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

how thorny of a problem it is trying to translate ideas across languages using a single word.

I can't help thinking that this is the reason why Lucretius seems to me to be saying the same thing over and over in various passages, just using different words, as if that's not just poetry but the way to triangulate on precise meanings:

For example four ways of saying atoms: "These we are accustomed in explaining their reason to call matter and heaving bodies of things and to name seeds of things and also to tern first things are."

LUCRETIUS

ne mea dona tibi studio disposta fideli,  
intellecta prius quam sint, contempta relinquo.  
nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque  
disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam, 55  
unde omnis natura creet res auctet alatque  
quove eadem rursum natura perempta resolvat,  
quae nos materiem et genitalia corpora rebus  
reddunda in ratione vocare et semina rerum  
appellare suemus et haec eadem usurpare 60  
corpora prima, quod ex illis sunt omnia primis.

I think it does make sense when explaining things to say it multiple ways.

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### Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2024 at 7:57 AM

I noted this section in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy On Hedonism when we talked about psychological hedonism the other night. This carries the point to an extreme, and it's a little concerning that the writer seems to have so many more words for pain than pleasure, 😊, but it does provide an illustration of the point (I added the underlining):

#### Quote

In general, pleasure is understood broadly below, as including or as included in all pleasant feeling or experience: contentment, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, exhilaration, exultation, gladness, gratification, gratitude, joy, liking, love, relief, satisfaction, Schadenfreude, tranquility, and so on.

Pain or displeasure too is understood broadly below, as including or as included in all unpleasant experience or feeling: ache, agitation, agony, angst, anguish, annoyance, anxiety, apprehensiveness, boredom, chagrin, dejection, depression, desolation, despair, desperation, despondency, discomfort, discombobulation, discontentment, disgruntlement, disgust, dislike, dismay, disorientation, dissatisfaction, distress, dread, enmity, ennui, fear, gloominess, grief, guilt, hatred, horror, hurting, irritation, loathing,

melancholia, nausea, queasiness, remorse, resentment, sadness, shame, sorrow, suffering, sullenness, throb, terror, unease, vexation, and so on. 'Pain or displeasure' is usually stated below just as 'pain' or just as 'displeasure'.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/#ArgForPsyHed>

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### **Post by "Don" of April 23, 2024 at 8:25 AM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I can't help thinking that this is the reason why Lucretius seems to me to be saying the same thing over and over in various passages, just using different words, as if that's not just poetry but the way to triangulate on precise meanings:

Do I remember correctly that Lucretius specifically writes about having difficulty translating Greek words/ideas into Latin... Or am I thinking of Cicero?

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### **Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2024 at 8:31 AM**

Definitely Lucretius says that, and maybe Cicero does too, but I am not quick enough to cite the references on the spot 😊

I know there's discussion in Cicero too about the task of the translator - it may be in the opening section of "On the Nature of the Gods," but I think it's where he discusses his method of compiling the existing texts into his "dialogue" form.

On Nature of Gods near beginning:

become authors themselves. A great many accomplished students of Greek learning were unable to share their acquisitions with their fellow-citizens, on the ground that they doubted the possibility of conveying in Latin the teachings they had received from the Greeks. In the matter of style however I believe that we have made such progress that even in richness of vocabulary the Greeks do not surpass us.

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## Post by “Little Rocker” of April 23, 2024 at 8:04 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Do I remember correctly that Lucretius specifically writes about having difficulty translating Greek words/ideas into Latin... Or am I thinking of Cicero?

Cicero also definitely complains about it, mostly when discussing all the technical terms of the Stoics. From *De Finibus* 3.5: 'The most learned people [the Greeks], working in a language which is generally considered to be richer than our own [Latin], are still allowed to use unfamiliar terms when dealing with recondite material. All the greater is the allowance that should be made for us [folks writing in Latin] who are so bold as to tackle these topics for the first time.' (trans. Woolf). Of course, he then claims Latin is technically superior--he just has to invent a lot of new words himself.