

Why Minimizing All Desire Is Incorrect (And What To Do Instead)

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 4, 2024 at 11:15 AM

I've been thinking about how to express a response to incorrect statements that Epicureans were people who minimized their desires. Also behind this is the idea that having desires cause pain, and thus leads to the erroneous idea to try to remove desire rather than doing what needs to be done to achieve the goals of desire. But the goals of desire are pleasure and removal of pain. We've talked about this already in many other places on the forum in other threads, but...well why not again. 😊

Since I am starting with theory (and quotes from the [Principal Doctrines](#)) to point to why this idea is incorrect, I decided to post in this forum rather than the [Practical Applications Forum](#). But ultimately this needs to be applied in one's life, so I hope to write about practical applications as well (in later additional posts).

In the [Principal Doctrines](#) we see:

[PD22](#): You must reflect on the fundamental goal and everything that is clear, to which opinions are referred; if you do not, all will be full of trouble and confusion. (Saint Andre translation)

[PD25](#): If at all critical times you do not connect each of your actions to the natural goal of life, but instead turn too soon to some other kind of goal in thinking whether to avoid or pursue something, then your thoughts and your actions will not be in harmony. (Saint Andre translation)

In the Torquatus narrative (section 30) we read:

"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. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet..." (Reid translation)

Seeing that we are naturally drawn to pleasure just as we are naturally drawn to the sweetness of honey, let us now consider this question: What should we do when we want something but it is difficult or impossible to get?

[PD26](#) says this: "The desires that do not bring pain when they go unfulfilled are not necessary; indeed they are easy to reject if they are hard to achieve or if they seem to produce harm."

1) If a desire for something is easy to fulfill then there is no problem with it unless it produces harm as a consequence. (see PD8)

2) The desires that bring pain when unfulfilled are the ones that are necessary (necessary desires) and so these are the ones to put time and effort into fulfilling. By pain = physical pain AND those things which when unfulfilled lead to depletion of strength/health of the body and the mind. (see Letter to Menoeceus).

[PD30](#) says this: "Among natural desires, those that do not bring pain when unfulfilled and that require intense exertion arise from groundless opinion; and such desires fail to be stamped out not by nature but because of the groundless opinions of humankind."

It is common sense that all animals (including humans) need to eat to live, and naturally become hungry (with a feeling of discomfort). This occurs daily and we easily know what to do when we are hungry - we eat!

It is important to think about what other "creature comforts" we are born to desire? These are the desires that occur over and over again, and when they are adequately fulfilled on an ongoing basis they lead to good health and happiness, plus the experience of pleasure arises when these desires are fulfilled. Unfortunately we don't have a specific list from the extant texts of Epicurus, but we do see that friendship ([PD27](#)) and self-sufficiency (achieving security of adequate skills/resources) are ones that are highlighted.

I hope this shows that Epicureans are actually embracing many desires by fulfilling desires, and that we need not fear the feeling of desire, but instead turn towards the ones that nature gives us with joy.

There is probably a lot more to add here, so I welcome further thoughts. 😊


Post by "Pacatus" of December 4, 2024 at 1:03 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I hope this shows that Epicureans are actually embracing many desires by fulfilling desires, and that we need not fear the feeling of desire, but instead turn towards the ones that nature gives us with joy.

Well said – and bears repeating! Thank you. 

You mentioned [PD08](#): “**No pleasure is a bad thing in itself**”; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.” [Also VS50]

That also means, to me, that no desire is a bad thing *in itself*. Desire is what awakens and guides the pursuit of pleasure (from your Torquatus quote: “*pleasure is matter for desire*”). It’s not the desires that are a problem, but – *sometimes* – how we act, or refrain from acting, in their pursuit; and the consequences of their fulfillment. That is the guardrail exception – not the rule. (As you once said so succinctly: “There are no rules, only choices.” My sage therapist, when I was going through a hard time, said much the same thing. I have not forgotten your reminder! )

People who gravitate toward an “ascetic Epicureanism” often cite Epicurus’ criticism of profligacy in the Letter to Menoceus: “ ... When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind.

“For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit.” [131, in part, and 132]

But, I would read that as a caution that needs to be seen through the lens of (contextualized by) [PD10](#): “**If** the things that produce the pleasures of profligates *could* dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), [**then**] we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.” [My emphasis and brackets]

Epicurus’ breakdown of desires into (1) natural and necessary, (2) natural and unnecessary and (3) unnatural is a wise guide to healthful and beneficial choosing. But “**No pleasure is a bad thing in itself.**”

Post by “Matteng” of December 4, 2024 at 4:09 PM

Yes the natural / necessary desires are of the highest value. Without them life declines like in a depression

Often these desires are shortened as desires for the stomach, a prejudice from Cicero/Stoics/Platonists which say „ we desire perfect knowledge and harmony with the cosmos, you Epicureans only to get your stomach full...”

But the core embraced desires include

- Body / health (Aponia)
- Life/ Security (Life means more than having a healthy body, sometimes we have to sacrifice health or choose pain for living)
- Happiness /Eudaimonia/Ataraxia

(which means more than simply to live, you can live a miserable life with an troubled frustrated mind and sometimes we limit/ sacrifice our life or parts for our values, like in extremes dying for a friend/ love/community / or our dignity)

So natural/necessary desires include a whole set of personal values and Emotions imo and how I understand the letter of menocaus.

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2024 at 4:56 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Yes the natural / necessary desires are of the highest value.

Depending on the contextual meaning assigned to the word "value," I don't think that can be sustained as a foundational Epicurean rule.

Yes you need them to live, but that does not mean necessarily that they are "most pleasant." Epicurus clearly states in his letter that the wise man is not going to seek the longest life, but the most pleasant.

And he also states that sometimes we will choose to die, as for a friend, or when we are sure that the pain of our future life will make living on not worthwhile in terms of pleasure.

So I think more work needs to be done on stating that most accurately in Epicurean terms.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 4, 2024 at 5:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes you need them to live, but that does not mean necessarily that they are "most pleasant." Epicurus clearly states in his letter that the wise man is not going to seek the longest life, but the most pleasant.

I've often wondered, in that context, if "necessary" is supposed to mean what is simply necessary for bare survival (as it sometimes seems taken to be - again, by proponents of the "bread-and-water" ascetic wing) or necessary for the most pleasant life. I think you've answered that question here. And (if I read you right) I agree: it *has* to be that.

Post by “Joshua” of December 4, 2024 at 7:36 PM

I may be alone in this, but I continue to think that desire is a kind of pain. We feel it as pain because we feel it as dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction is a kind of pain.

This is not an argument for asceticism; it is sometimes used as a *premise* in arguments for asceticism, but there is no reason to think that the one follows from the other.

Quote

In order that Idomeneus may not be introduced free of charge into my letter, he shall make up the indebtedness from his own account. It was to him that Epicurus addressed the well-known saying urging him to make Pythocles rich, but not rich in the vulgar and equivocal way. "If you wish," said he, "to make Pythocles rich, do not add to his store of money, but subtract from his desires."

Event Date: 60 LA

§ 21.8 This idea is too clear to need explanation, and too clever to need reinforcement. There is, however, one point on which I would warn you, - not to consider that this statement applies only to riches; its value will be the same, no matter how you apply it. "If you wish to make Pythocles honourable, do not add to his honours, but subtract from his desires"; "if you wish Pythocles to have pleasure for ever, do not add to his pleasures, but subtract from his desires"; "if you wish to make Pythocles an old man, filling his life to the full, do not add to his years, but subtract from his desires."

Event Date: 60 LA

§ 21.9 There is no reason why you should hold that these words belong to Epicurus alone; they are public property. I think we ought to do in philosophy as they are wont to do in the Senate: when someone has made a motion, of which I approve to a certain extent, I ask him to make his motion in two parts, and I vote for the part which I approve. So I am all the more glad to repeat the distinguished words of Epicurus, in order that I may prove to those who have recourse to him through a bad motive, thinking that they will have in him a screen for their own vices, that they must live honourably, no matter what school they follow.

Event Date: 60 LA

§ 21.10 Go to his Garden and read the motto carved there: 'Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.' The care-taker of that abode, a kindly host, will be ready for you; he will welcome you with barley-meal and serve you water also in abundance, with these words: "Have you not been well entertained?" "This garden," he says, "does not whet your appetite; it quenches it. Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, a cure that demands no fee. This is the 'pleasure' in which I have grown old."

-Seneca, Letters to Lucilius

I'm quite happy to endorse Epicurus as quoted. Seneca will have to answer for his own additions in section 21.8: at any rate, I should say that 'if you wish Pythocles to have pleasure for ever, add to his pleasures AND subtract from his desires.'

Quote

Have you not been well entertained?

Maybe Ridley Scott is a fan after all!

Post by "Cassius" of December 4, 2024 at 7:52 PM

Yes Joshua has in my mind quoted the best citation that can be raised in support of the proposition that all desires should be limited: ""If you wish," said he, "to make Pythocles rich, do not add to his store of money, but subtract from his desires."

And you can add in the statement about how when we are in no pain we have no need of pleasure.

BUT in response to those there are very many good arguments that those statements are contextual, and that life and pleasure are desirable, and those those general principles override the contextual instances in which impossible desires necessarily lead to more pain than pleasure.

This is an excellent discussion to pursue in great detail.

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 5, 2024 at 2:10 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

I may be alone in this, but I continue to think that desire is a kind of pain. We feel it as pain because we feel it as dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction is a kind of pain.

Every individual perceives things subjectively according to the given circumstances. And it seem that there are differing levels of intensity of desire (from just a low-level niggling feeling of dissatisfaction up to high-level stress, anger or hopelessness.)

There are some desires that when we know they will will soon be fulfilled, it is a pleasurable experience of anticipation. For example: feeling mildly hungry and arriving for Christmas, smelling the turkey just out of the oven, and the announcement for everyone to come sit down at the dining table.

When we desire something and believe we need it, but yet we don't know how to get it, that it when desire feels painful. (For example: feeling extremely hungry, arriving for Christmas, being told the the turkey just went into the oven, and noticing that there are no hors d'oeuvres).

I think as time goes on (and depending on circumstances) the sense of pain can shift to feel less painful, because we can learn to problem solve situations. (For example: remembering to always pack a small amount of food (nuts or protein bar) with you if you tend to have hypoglycemia episodes).

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 2:15 PM

I think Post 8 is the right direction, parsing the exact meaning of the word "desire" and examining the context in which the desire occurs. As with everything else, it's not like there's some ideal form labelled "desire" floating out there in the atmosphere somewhere with a "good" or "bad" label attached to it.

In fact I would ask this:

Is there anything that is ALWAYS Pleasurable except PLEASURE? I would say no.

Is there anything that is ALWAYS painful except PAIN? Again I would say no.

At this very high level it seems to me like **everything** else, including *desire*, is going to be contextual, and needs to be seen as a tool for achieving pleasure or avoiding pain.

And if that is the case then as Kalosyni says, any particular desire, and in fact desire in general, must be seen as something that has to be judged in context.

And that would also lead to the conclusion that too *little* desire can be every bit as bad a thing as too *much* desire.

And that's something that I strongly think is the case, and strongly think is a widespread problem with common modern discussion of Epicurean philosophy.

The tone of many generalist articles on Epicurus on the internet too often rings of *suppression* of desire that has more akin to Buddhism or Stoicism. It seems to me that what Epicurus taught was to look to what a particular desire brings, rather than viewing desire itself as bad or painful.

Post by “Joshua” of December 5, 2024 at 2:40 PM

Quote

Is there anything that is ALWAYS Pleasurable except PLEASURE? I would say no.

Is there anything that is ALWAYS painful except PAIN? Again I would say no.

At this very high level it seems to me like **everything** else, including *desire*, is going to be contextual, and needs to be seen as a tool for achieving pleasure or avoiding pain.

What I am suggesting is that 'desire' is a word that we use to describe one particular kind of pain, just as 'headache' is a word used to describe another particular kind of pain.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 2:45 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

What I am suggesting is that 'desire' is a word that we use to describe one particular kind of pain, just as 'headache' is a word used to describe another particular kind of pain.

Yep, I would definitely agree that it can be used that way.

But can it not ALSO be used in a way that is entirely positive and pleasurable, in which the pleasure of anticipation and preparation for the experience are every bit as enjoyable as the experience itself?

I think it can be used both ways. Where I see the Buddhists (or similar viewpoints) at fault is that they presume that the word desire can only be used to describe suffering, because at a very fundamental level they view life as inherently suffering.

Epicurus seems to me to be the opposite. Epicurus views life as inherently pleasurable, and it only ceases to be pleasurable when some specific pain intervenes.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2024 at 2:47 PM

From the Torquatus section of Book One of On Ends:

(4) But we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn uneasiness at once ensues, unless the pleasure happens to have been replaced by a pain: while on the other hand one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure comes in its place: a fact that serves to show how great a pleasure is the mere absence of pain.

(5) But just as we are elated by the anticipation of good things, so we are delighted by their recollection. Fools are tormented by the memory of former evils; wise men have the delight of renewing in grateful remembrance the blessings of the past. We have the power both to obliterate our misfortunes in an almost perpetual forgetfulness and to summon up pleasant and agreeable memories of our successes. But when we fix our mental vision closely on the events of the past, then sorrow or gladness ensues according as these were evil or good.

Being *elated by the anticipation* of something seems to me to be part and parcel of "desiring" it.

Post by "Joshua" of December 5, 2024 at 3:58 PM

Quote

But can it not ALSO be used in a way that is entirely positive and pleasurable, in which the pleasure of anticipation and preparation for the experience are every bit as enjoyable as the experience itself?

Being elated by the anticipation of something seems to me to be part and parcel of "desiring" it.

Anticipating the fulfillment of a desire can be pleasureable, in the same way that anticipating the removal of a pain can be pleasureable. You wouldn't call a headache pleasant simply because you know relief is at hand.

In the case of romantic desire, the one who feels that desire (the sting of Cupid's arrow, if you will) may indulge in fantasizing about getting the person they want. The fantasy might be pleasureable, but when that person comes down from that high they are left with the bare pain of desire.

The fantasy which brings pleasure might actually postpone their joy;

Quote

VS18. If sight, association, and intercourse are all removed, the πάθος (pathos) of love is ended.

I am not willing to cede ground to the Buddhists who wish to demonstrate that life is bitter; they can make that argument themselves. My argument is that life is sweet, because the pain of desire has its happy resolution, not in renunciation, or in mortification, but in pleasure. Some desires we should satisfy. Some we should consider carefully before satisfying. Some we should recognize as unsatisfiable, and cast them off.

Quote

Some men say to themselves:

“No more shall my house admit me with glad welcome, nor a virtuous wife and sweet children run to be the first to snatch kisses and touch my heart with joy. No more may I be prosperous in my doings, a safeguard to my own. One disastrous day has taken from me, luckless man, all the many prizes of life.”

But these men do not add:

“And now no longer does any craving for these things beset me either.”

-Lucretius, Book III

Post by “Patrikios” of December 5, 2024 at 10:39 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But can it not ALSO be used in a way that is entirely positive and pleasurable, in which the pleasure of anticipation and preparation for the experience are every bit as enjoyable as the experience itself?

[Cassius](#) I agree that '**desire**' is one of our important natural feelings that can help us achieve some of our most important goals or missions in life [**telos**]. My understanding of studying nature is that life is to create and re-create. Our body's cells are being re-created all the time. Most people have a natural desire to make things (e.g. create something that improves their happiness) that didn't exist, but now exists. Looking to nature shows how plants and animals are creating new life and contributing to other plants and animals.

I find in the Letter to Menoecus, Epicurus states:

*"We must also reflect that **of desires some are natural**, others are groundless; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live."*

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2024 at 5:45 AM

This is a very interesting discussion. I can't think of a lot more to add at the moment as I type this other than to emphasize that we need to explore it a lot further.

Perhaps too this is a place for discussion of the implication of some of what the Epicureans had to say about divinity. Even if (or especially if!) gods are considered to be thought constructs, what do our expectations of the life of a god tell us about what we should extrapolate to be the best life for ourselves. Would gods have no desires, or simply no "unmeetable" desires, or no lusts that intoxicate them, or what?

I am concerned that we may be mixing our monotheistic modern Judeo-Christian views of omnipotence into thinking that Epicurus would have thought that gods have no desires because they can magically create anything they want. I doubt that is something that Epicurus would have thought, so I think we need to be sure to steer clear of any implication that gods are supernaturally "above" things like desire.

So the germ of a thought here is that perhaps "desire" as a general category is something that is part and parcel of even our best extrapolation of the best life. If so, "desire" as a general category of human activity would by no means be inherently painful either in practice or in theory.

It is certainly tempting to take the position that if you have "desire" then that means you are "lacking" something, and that therefore all "lack" is felt as pain. However the implications of that position seem so far-reachingly negative (or are they?) as to be irreconcilable with Epicurus' approach that continuing to be alive is a fundamentally desirable thing.

But it's a position that we want to argue more confidently than our current discussion seems to allow. And I am not sure there is anything more important in Epicurean theory for us to address than the implications of this question. It wraps up a LOT of issues in a single package.

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2024 at 7:09 AM

I suspect there is another analogy to pursue here too:'

The Religionist/ Virtue-ethics / anti-hedonists crowd has an inherent antipathy to pleasure. A major tactic that they use is to narrow the definition of pleasure to focus only the sensual pleasures, which they find easiest to disparage, and so they make arguments that imply that the term "pleasure" consists only of "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll" which they believe are easily caricatured as leading to disastrous results.

The Buddhists (who are really part of the first crowd but who are more honest about their antipathy to pleasure) do the same thing with desire. Unlike the Stoics and western religions which aren't so willing to come right out and preach "life is suffering," the Buddhist team isn't satisfied with attacking pleasure, they want to attack life itself in the form of the desire to remain living. So they narrow the definition of desire so as to focus only on the desires that are most intoxicating and in many cases impossible, and that allows them to disparage *all* desire and make arguments that imply that the term "desire" consists only of those desires that frequently lead to disastrous results.

So I think that the key to resolution of this seeming paradox is to take a wider view of desire, just like Epicurus takes a wider view of pleasure, and to resist the manipulation of definitions of important terms so that a philosophy based on the desire to pursue pleasure and avoid pain becomes impossible.

Post by "Don" of December 6, 2024 at 8:20 AM

That's not quite the Buddhist perspective. I think it's important if we're going to argue against their position (and I am more than fine with that, to be clear!), it should be clear what we're arguing against.

The first Noble Truth (NT) is usually translated "Life is suffering" but that's almost as misleading as just saying "pleasure is the good." The word translated suffering is dukkha.

[The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary](#)

So, a better paraphrase of NT1 is "Life as most everyone lives it is unsatisfactory, filled with misery, pain, unfulfilled desire, etc." It's not wrong, life can be painful. But it tries to catch all things wrong with *how* people live in one word. That sounds familiar to the Epicureans problem with conveying the meaning of pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Buddhist team isn't satisfied with attacking pleasure, they want to attack life itself in the form of the desire to remain living. So they narrow the definition of desire so as to focus only on the desires that are most intoxicating and in many cases impossible, and that allows them to disparage *all* desire and make arguments that imply that the term "desire" consists only of those desires that frequently lead to disastrous results.

Again, NT2 addresses why life is suffering: thirst, desire, craving. We want things to go a certain way, and when we don't get that, it's painful. The word is tanha. They don't go after "desires

that are most intoxicating and in many cases impossible," they go after ALL desires. Anything that we thirst for or desire or crave, if we don't get it, that brings suffering. They say all desire, all craving, results in dukkha. Tanha is analogous in its comprehensive nature to pleasure for Epicureans. NOT philosophically!! Just semantically, tanha does a lot of heavy lifting, like the word hēdonē does for our school.

I'm not going to turn this into a Buddhist apologetic, but I think it's important to get details right when we're arguing against other schools - and we should argue! Just don't want to strawman any of them.

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2024 at 9:13 AM

"Life as most everyone lives it is unsatisfactory, filled with misery, pain, unfulfilled desire, etc."

Thanks for that - yes I want to be accurate - and I think your description of the Buddhist position makes it worse from an Epicurean perspective than what i described. They do not offer a positive view of pleasure as the remedy to that problem, but essentially nothingness - the death of desire.

So don't let me go too easy on it!

The remedy to misery, pain, and unfulfilled desire is NOT to end desire, nor to minimize desire, nor to define desire out of existence, or to wish ourselves out of existence. A philosophy which values life, rather than seeks to extinguish it, will seek to intelligently pursue pleasure, which specifically includes those desires for the pleasures of the senses that these other philosophies focus their time on condemning.

I do agree that we don't want to turn this into an expose on Buddhism (we've gone through most of that already) but there's a reason why anyone who seeks to suppress desire and pleasure is relevant, and the issues have to be confronted head-on.

The Discussions focused on Buddhism are here:

[Epicurus vs. Buddha and the Buddhists](#)

Including particularly this thread:

Post

RE: 2022 Epicurus vs Buddhism Compare and Contrast Thread

Of the ancient Indian philosophies of **Ājīvika**, **Ajñāna**, **Buddhism**, **Chārvāka**, **Jainism**, **Mīmāṃsā**, **Nyāya**, **Samkhya**, **Vaisheshika**, **Vedānta**, and **Yoga**, we'll find the closest companion to Epicureanism in **Chārvāka**. Early Buddhism is most closely related to the Indian school of **Ajñāna**, from which Pyrrhonism developed, so, in general, I don't think that comparisons between early Buddhism and Epicurean philosophy are helpful. They are dissimilar and historically unrelated.

In terms of physics, Epicureanism...

Eikadistes

January 27, 2022 at 10:02 PM

Post by "Cassius" of December 6, 2024 at 9:29 AM

"A philosophy which values life, rather than seeks to extinguish it, will seek to intelligently pursue pleasure,"

---- writing that helps me focus on the time issue. I don't think you can value "life" without implying that you also value "the continuation of life over time." Since we only have "the now" and we don't have total control over the future, it seems to me that there is inherently going to be a "desire for time" element in valuing life that is not eliminated by saying "I'm satisfied with what I have already experienced. "

There's got to be a way to articulate a philosophically proper perspective in which you are both (1) satisfied that you have lived well so far, but you also (2) possess a desire for the continuance of that life without that desire for continuance being construed as pain or anything that is negative.

I think we've talked about in the past as well that the issue of "variation" in the sense of unlimited time producing no "greater" pleasure, but only variation, does not imply that variation itself is not valuable or desirable. All of us know by experience that variation IS valuable and desirable. So it's not that variation over time isn't desirable, because it is. The point has to be more the philosophical one that variation cannot make "pure pleasure" (in the sense of total absence of pain) "more pure," and variation cannot make "total absence of pain" more "total."

Post by “Matteng” of December 6, 2024 at 3:51 PM

I thought a little further about desire and the natural/necessary desires.

- Yes unfulfilled desires are/causes pain

- The faculty of pain/pleasure is there to guide us to fulfill these desires and gives pleasure when it is followed

- Without desire and the pleasure in fulfilling and pain in not fulfilling, life would vanish.

=> Our whole body exists for that, we have arms, legs, stomachs, organs, brain etc. which we would not need if we have no need for searching for food/drink/security. Like a stork, often seen as a divine animal but all its organs are selected/adapted / evolved for efficient survival in swamps.

It would be like in Christianity the thoughts about "heaven". If you have no needs/desires/motives for what do you need a body ? A house ? A city ? What are you doing ?

We would be empty roboters but with no function because a function has only meaning and evolved when fulfilling a purpose, a telos.

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2024 at 4:12 PM

As for me in my current thinking, I am generally in agreement with most of post 20, but I would still say that the following excerpt from it ("unfulfilled desires are/cause pain") is overbroad.

[Quote from Matteng](#)

- Yes unfulfilled desires are/causes pain

I would be closer to agreeing that "unfulfillable" desires are or cause pain, but I suspect that too would be too overbroad. You might desire to recover from late-stage disease, and that desire would be pleasurable for you as long as you maintain it, even though it might be impossible to achieve. Heck - this even goes for Epicurus' statement in the letter to Menoecus that it would be better to believe the myths of the gods than to give in to determinism. In that statement he

couldn't be saying that the gods would in fact reward the worshiper, and he probably means that the thought of getting the reward would at least be pleasurable for so long as you could maintain the fiction.

Closer yet might be "intoxicating desires" are or cause pain, but even then for the duration of the intoxication that can often be pleasurable (or so I am told!).

Maybe there's no way around the conclusion that only rigorous way to state this is that "painful desires" are in fact the only desires properly labeled as painful.

But that's the question before the house.

Post by "Don" of December 6, 2024 at 11:11 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

But, I would read that as a caution that needs to be seen through the lens of (contextualized by) [PD10](#):

[Pacatus](#) isn't the only one to bring up [PD10](#) et al, but I'm just using his quote as a jumping off point.

I continue to advocate for seeing [PD10](#), 11, and 12 as one body and not discrete "[principal doctrines](#)" (Saint-Andre translation, emphasis, bracketed additions, and re-arrangement mine)...

- ONE: IF the things that produce the delights of those who are decadent washed away the mind's fears about astronomical phenomena and death and suffering, and
- IF furthermore [*the delights of those who are decadent*] taught us the limits of our pains and desires,
- THEN we would have no complaints against them, since they would be filled with every joy and would contain not a single pain or distress (and that's what is bad).
- [Additionally] IF our suspicions about astronomical phenomena and about death were nothing to us and troubled us not at all, and
- IF this were also the case regarding our *ignorance* about the limits of our pains (of either mind or body) and desires,
- THEN we would have no need for studying what is natural.
- It is impossible for someone who is completely ignorant about nature to wash away his fears about the most important matters if he retains some suspicions about the myths. So it is impossible to experience undiluted enjoyment without studying what is natural.

LOTS of "if... then"'s in those statements. I know [Cassius](#) and I have had this discussion *ad nauseum*, but I'll give him this (if I understand his position):

IF the *pleasures* (*NOT desires!*) of the [ἄσωτος](#) (asotos: one having no hope of safety, one in a desperate case, one who is lost, a profligate/prodigal - same word used in reference to the [Prodigal Son in the Bible](#)) washed away fears, then there would be no cause to blame, censure, find fault: μεμψάμεθα. Where we differ (I believe) is that, to me, that is merely hypothetical and not born out in reality. That's *why* we have cause to blame, censure, find fault with the prodigal *not limiting* the pleasures that they decide to experience. There are natural limits for a reason, one we discover by studying nature.

This follows right along with the next section, that IF we had no suspicions (derived from same word in the 2nd line of the Tetrpharmakos about death!) about death and were not ignorant of the limits of pains and desires, THEN we wouldn't have to study nature.

BUT we DO have to study nature and, to me, it then follows that we DO, in fact, have reason to find fault with the pleasures of the prodigal.

Post by “Don” of December 6, 2024 at 11:24 PM

To reflect on the title of this thread: "Why Minimizing All Desire Is Incorrect (And What To Do Instead)" - I would agree that we aren't called to "minimize all desire" or, to rephrase that, minimize pleasures that we experience down to a bare minimal number of allowed ones.

Epicurus wrote that "all pleasure is good." If we equate "*the pleasures of the profligate*" at all times and all places with every experience of "*the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms,*" and avoid every experience of these (and other pleasures I'm sure we can think of), that's not the point. I continue to contend that it's the unlimited indulgence of any one pleasure that becomes an issue for Epicurus. Although, it's easier to avoid some to begin with if one knows the likely outcome beforehand. Nevertheless, if you indulge in "sex, drugs, and rock and roll"; Epicurus is going to be there afterwards shaking his head, giving you some frank speech, but no doubt welcoming you back to the garden if you want to sincerely learn about the "limits of our pains (of either mind or body) and desires" and to "study nature." He wrote a treatise set as a discussion among attendees (including *himself*) at a drinking party ([Symposium, Συμπόσιον](#), number 18 on Diogenes Laertius' list) where they discuss, among other things, whether wine has warming or cooling properties and getting omens from indigestion.

Epicureanism has always been to me a philosophy of personal responsibility (tempered with an understanding of chance and circumstance). It's the outcomes of the choices that are made,

NOT (necessarily) the pleasures experienced in and of themselves. I will continue to think that [PD10-12](#) provides a beginning framework of why and how to understand the limits that we should consider to be prudent choice-makers.

Post by “Cassius” of December 7, 2024 at 12:49 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Nevertheless, if you indulge in "sex, drugs, and rock and roll"; Epicurus is going to be there afterwards shaking his head, giving you some frank speech, but no doubt welcoming you back to the garden if you want to sincerely learn about the "limits of our pains (of either mind or body) and desires" and to "study nature."

Perhaps you equate "indulge" with "over-indulge," or perhaps that's a typo, but I would think that sentence definitely needs to read "OVER indulge" to be clear. That's because I am pretty sure we agree that "sex, drugs, and rocknroll" are definitely desirable pleasures, and completely proper ones, when not "overindulged in" - which means essentially "to excess." Correct?

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicureanism has always been to me a philosophy of personal responsibility (tempered with an understanding of chance and circumstance). It's the outcomes of the choices that are made, NOT (necessarily) the pleasures experienced in and of themselves.

I completely agree with the emphasis on personal responsibility, unless you mean that wording to indicate that personal responsibility is more important than pleasure itself. I don't think you mean that, but in the context of the discussion I could see someone casually reading the post thinking that is what you mean. We live for pleasure, and personal responsibility is essential to ensure that we do not overindulge and end up with too much pain, but personal responsibility itself is just a "virtue" and therefore a "tool" for living pleasurably, and it is living pleasurably ("pleasure") that is the goal.

The difference in our readings continues to be (I think) that you and I have a different view of the usefulness and meaning of hypotheticals. In itself that difference is not a bad thing, but it needs to be understood by people browsing through the threads. I would say you're more suspicious of the problem of the stating accurate premises to include in using hypotheticals than I am, and so you sometimes take the intent of the hypothetical somewhat differently. I am willing to embrace that problem and believe that the challenges in stating the premises are

what helps the point of the hypothetical to sink in. Regardless of that, however, in the end, I think we arrive mostly at the same place.

Post by “Don” of December 7, 2024 at 9:03 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That's because I am pretty sure we agree that "sex, drugs, and rocknroll" are definitely desirable pleasures, and completely proper ones, when not "overindulged in" - which means essentially "to excess." Correct?

Correct, I think. "The pleasures of the prodigal" are, to my reading, by definition pleasures to excess. Luke 15:13 which uses ασωτως (the adverb form of the word in [PD10](#)) is variously translated as:

- in wild living (NIV)
- with riotous living. (KJV)
- in dissolute living (NRSVue)
- in reckless and immoral living. (Amplified Bible)

To me, τὰ ποιητικὰ τῶν περὶ τοὺς ἀσώτους ἡδονῶν "the things that produce the delights of those who are decadent" is very specific and carefully worded phrase. It *doesn't* say (and I'm guilty of implying it does) "the pleasures" themselves are the problem. The "*the things that produce*" the pleasures of the one who is overindulging are the main topic/subject of that phrase. So, we have two options to interpret that first part of [PD10](#):

1. Are "the things that produce" the pleasures of the profligate referring to *specific activities*: possibly including drinking, gambling, dancing, sex, etc.,?
2. Are "the things that produce" the pleasures of the profligate referring to the overindulgent , unlimited participation in those activities?

I *think* it has to be number two since Epicurus includes all activities that bring pleasure as defined as good. Therefore, if riotous, wild, reckless living and experiencing every pleasure without limits did dispel fears and taught us about the limits of pain and desires, then we'd have no complaints against those who indulge in pleasure that way. But I believe he makes us ask the question: "Does riotous, wild, reckless living and experiencing every pleasure without limits dispel fears and teach us about the limits of pain and desires?" The hypothetical (as you describe this PD) drives home the requirement to look at how we normally view pleasure. I think a large number of people today think "riotous, wild, reckless living" when they hear

pleasure or hedonism. Epicurus, Philodemus, the whole Garden seem to have been confronting this same battle of both inadvertent and deliberate misunderstanding of their school. To me, it's both a philosophical point and practical advice, taken together with what has become [PD11](#) and [PD12](#).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I completely agree with the emphasis on personal responsibility, unless you mean that wording to indicate that personal responsibility is more important than pleasure itself. I don't think you mean that, but in the context of the discussion I could see someone casually reading the post thinking that is what you mean. We live for pleasure, and personal responsibility is essential to ensure that we do not overindulge and end up with too much pain, but personal responsibility itself is just a "virtue" and therefore a "tool" for living pleasurably, and it is living pleasurably ("pleasure") that is the goal.

We definitely agree here.

Post by “Cassius” of December 7, 2024 at 9:34 AM

It is unfortunate that we have to choose only one responsive icon, because I wanted to use both the like and the smile face. Limited to only one choice, I chose the like!

As usual I think we are in almost total agreement, with the only possible exception being:

[Quote from Don](#)

I *think* it has to be number two since Epicurus includes all activities that bring pleasure as defined as good.

You mean there is doubt in your mind about that? 😊

Smiling aside I do have something additional to contribute that this gives me the opportunity to say.

I focused several comments on the use of "hypothetical" constructs, but that may not be the primary issue that's going on (not between our two interpretations, but something that's causing widespread issues).

Rather than the issue being use of hypotheticals, maybe the word is the issue of the *literalism* that Epicurus seems to me to be using. (Mostly option one of the following definition.)

Quote

literalism [lit-er-uh-liz-uhm] **noun**

1. adherence to the exact letter or the [literal](#) sense, as in translation or interpretation:

to interpret the law with uncompromising literalism.

2. a peculiarity of expression resulting from this:

The work is studded with these obtuse literalisms.

3. exact representation or portrayal, without idealization, as in art or literature:

a literalism more appropriate to journalism than to the novel.

Display More

For example when he says things like "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain" or "[death is nothing to us](#)" or "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once."

I think he means those statements to be taken absolutely literary, and not in any way metaphorically or allegorically or in any way that would undercut the takeaway that he means what he says and says what he means.

He's literally defining pleasure as absence of pain, which means pain is absence of pleasure, and the two options are to be taken as literally the same, at the very least for the purpose of logical analysis.

Joshua's been regularly suggesting that the statement about believing gods to be living beings blessed and imperishable is meant to be "definitional" about a god, and I think he's right, meaning that we should take Epicurus literally at his word. We can interpolate the implications of the statement all day, but the beginning of the analysis is that we should take him to be speaking very precisely.

That may be a better way of getting at the way [PD10](#) and many other statements are worded. It's reasonable to take them as hypotheticals and think through the implications to come to practical applications, but at the same time they are intended to be taken *literally*. It's the literalness that gives them their clarity and logical order, and allows you to judge exactly what is consistent and inconsistent with them.

Yes, literally, Epicurus seems clearly to me to be affirming as an absolute that yes, all pleasures are desirable, because they feel pleasurable, but at the same time, and without violating that first phrase, not all pleasures are to be chosen, because choosing them will frequently bring more pain than pleasure when all consequences are considered.



It's literally true at one and the same time that all pleasures are pleasing, yet not all pleasures are to be chosen, because -- considering all consequences -- the pain that generally follows will outweigh the pleasure.

BUT - and this is a big point - the reason it's not proper to go further and say that choosing them will DEFINITELY bring more pain than pleasure is that there is no force of determinism in the universe that guarantees that result. Generally, even an overwhelming number of times, the result is predictable, but it's not always predictable, because there is no force of necessity which requires it to be so. When Epicurus wouldn't even admit it to be necessary that Metrodorus will necessarily be alive or dead tomorrow, he's not going to admit it to be necessary that any particular choice will necessarily lead to a precise result in terms of net pleasure or pain.

Post by “Don” of December 7, 2024 at 10:12 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I wanted to use both the like and the smile face.

Back at you...  

Now we're getting somewhere.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

You mean there is doubt in your mind about that?

Yes, I suppose that's true. That could have been phrased better on my part.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

BUT - and this is a big point - the reason it's not proper to go further and say that choosing them will DEFINITELY bring more pain than pleasure is that there is no force of determinism in the universe that guarantees that result. Generally, even an

overwhelming number of times, the result is predictable, but it's not always predictable, because there is no force of necessity which requires it to be so. When Epicurus wouldn't even admit it to be necessary that Metrodorus will necessarily be alive or dead tomorrow, he's not going to admit it to be necessary that any particular choice will necessarily lead to a precise result in terms of net pleasure or pain.

BUT - if one thinks they're going to be the exception to the general rule, they're usually disappointed. Does someone from time to time win the lottery? Sure, but how much money has been lost by innumerable people in getting to that win? This PD + 11 & 12 conveys to me the supreme importance of learning from nature, from what our senses tell us. We don't live a hypothetical existence. We live here and now in this material universe and in these mortal, physical bodies using our senses and our minds to make the most prudent decisions to live a life as imbued with pleasure as we are able.

I agree that Epicurus wouldn't entertain the Metrodorus question. He also didn't appear to like the paradox of the hooded father*. To me, Epicurus didn't like playing word games. He said what he meant and meant what he said. Our problem, often, is that he said it 2,300 years ago in ancient Greek.

*A person is presented with a person wearing a hood and is asked "Do you know this person?" Unbeknownst to the person being asked, it's his father under hood. This is supposed to show one can know and not know something at the same time.

Post by "Cassius" of December 7, 2024 at 10:50 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

BUT - if one thinks they're going to be the exception to the general rule, they're usually disappointed.

I think you and I and probably all of us in this discussion are going to reach the same conclusions 99 out of 100 or maybe 100 out of 100 times.

But since one of our goals here is to be as clear as possible for ourselves and for others who are reading, we need to be clear: What really is the "general rule" that we are discussing?

As I see it, the most important general rule is that pleasure is desirable because it is pleasure. That's a flat assertion with no exceptions whatsoever.

Some pleasures are not sometimes undesirable or painful -- that never is the case, and thus there are no exceptions.

We shift the terminology when we talk about choice and avoidance. Many things - most things? - all things? can be either choiceworthy or non-choiceworthy depending on the circumstances. And we're probably in complete agreement about the probabilities of what is likely to bring more pain than pleasure.

Where Cicero and the majority of the rest of the world try to attack Epicurus is in conflating all these issues together and therefore asserting that "pleasure" is not the best term for the ultimate good. If we agree to that, then we invite in all sorts of logical problems that ultimately make it untenable to maintain that "pleasure" is the ultimate good or ultimate goal.

So I think there's very good reason for being an absolutist and a literalist on Epicurus' statements about pleasure. And that's why I am also very comfortable with "in-your-face" interpretations of [PD10](#) and other aggressive assertions (pleasure IS the absence of pain; the sun IS the size it appears to be; [all sensations ARE true](#); [death IS nothing to us](#), gods ARE living beings blessed and imperishable; the virtues (including wisdom, justice, friendship, and the rest) ARE nothing more than tools for pleasure; etc.). That kind of assertiveness is necessary to get the point across because most people don't think that way, and with them you have to "philosophize with a hammer!" 😊

(Credit goes to someone in the last Wednesday Zoom for bringing up that Nietzsche hammer allusion...)

Post by “Don” of December 7, 2024 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But since one of our goals here is to be as clear as possible for ourselves and for others who are reading, we need to be clear: What really is the "general rule" that we are discussing?

Hmmm... The general rule I see in play here is "Overindulgence leads to pain."

[Quote from Cassius](#)

general rule is that pleasure is desirable because it is pleasure. That's a flat assertion with no exceptions whatsoever.

Yeah, here we are with different interpretations of "rule." "Pleasure is desirable because it is pleasure" is just a tautology. Nothing is defined there, and it doesn't advance the argument. "Pleasure is the supreme good" at least hammers home a philosophical stance, and I see that as stating an observed fact, not as a general rule.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

we're probably in complete agreement about the probabilities of what is likely to bring more pain than pleasure.

Agreed.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Where Cicero and the majority of the rest of the world try to attack Epicurus is in conflating all these issues together and therefore asserting that "pleasure" is not the best term for the ultimate good. If we agree to that, then we invite in all sorts of logical problems that ultimately make it untenable to maintain that "pleasure" is the ultimate good or ultimate goal.

Agreed. Part of Epicurus' genius was hammering down that there were two, and only two, feelings: pleasure and pain. What wasn't one was the other. Boom. Therefore, to decrease the sorrow, pain, grief, anxiety, and, yes, indigestion in one's life is *the* path to follow along with, obviously, choosing activities that provide pleasure. And those things that lead to pleasure are indispensable tools that allow us to make progress on that path.

Post by "Cassius" of December 7, 2024 at 1:40 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Hmmm... The general rule I see in play here is "Overindulgence leads to pain"

While it is true that overindulgence does generally provide pain, I would see that as an uncontroversial point and therefore unlikely to be the reason for its inclusion, and especially for its inclusion in the manner it is written.

This exchange may seem pedantic but I think there is a lot more going on here than just the two of us talking shop so I think it's very useful!

My motivations are directed at what I perceived is a problem that I link to Martha Nussbaum's "Therapy of Desire." I think it helps to consider whether Epicurus was primarily a clinician or a revolutionary philosopher. In the end he is both, but the modern world's excess emphasis on the clinical aspect has in my view led to under-appreciation of the revolutionary implications of the philosophy.

"Everyone" accepts that overindulgence leads to pain, but "pleasure is the highest good" and "even the pleasures that some deplore are acceptable if they bring happiness to the person we think deplorable" are words that wars get fought over.

Post by "Don" of December 7, 2024 at 1:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This exchange may seem pedantic but I think there is a lot more going on here than just the two of us talking shop so I think it's very useful!



Oh, I can be guilty of being pedantic. Case in point: I'll disagree with people who don't see the need for the Oxford comma! But I digress...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would see that as an uncontroversial point and therefore unlikely to be the reason for its inclusion, and especially for its inclusion in the manner it is written.

See, here's a crux of our polite disagreement. And this goes way back and I don't think either of us have budged 😊 I see [PD10](#) as Epicurus planting a flag against the Cyrenaics specifically and other "pleasure seekers" of his day in general. I don't think it's an uncontroversial point. And the point I see him making in [PD10/11/12](#) with all those If... Then's... is that if all these cases were, in fact, the case; we'd have no reason to study nature or learn the limits of pains and desires or even study philosophy. However, those if's, in fact, don't give us what we need to live a pleasurable life and so we then DO need to study nature and learn the limits of pain and desires.

I've always and continue to think you and others have tried to make this/these PDs do more philosophical heavy lifting than they need to.

Post by "Root304" of December 8, 2024 at 2:57 AM

I take the approach of just not desiring many things or elaborate experiences; but the things I do desire I desire deeply, are impactful and more pragmatic: the cultivation of Friendships, arranging my material conditions like jobs and household the way that pleases me and other practices of Epicurean philosophy. I let go of longings that will likely not happen or that are outside of my control or that I am ambivalent about happening. Or I shift the longing into something reasonable like my longing for connection to Divinity is now commonplace as the Gods are readily visitable. I make choices to connect with people and for instance, have children, knowing full well that relationships and people do not last and nothing is guaranteed, but genuine human connection is worth the eventual and inevitable pain of separation and I anticipate it so that I shall suffer in more pleasant ways. I arrange my life at all times easily enough choosing to cultivate Friendships through mutual aid and occasional celebration with friends. When you've got a lot of relationships and schedules and taking care of one another's families like they are your own and favors for favors, your schedule gets booked up quick, and things like springing for a fancy cheese or a fancy beer every couple of weeks all just gets mixed in not so much with a singular desire from my self but gets mixed with heightening the experience of hospitality and fun with friends.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 8, 2024 at 11:16 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Case in point: I'll disagree with people who don't see the need for the Oxford comma!

Uh oh! 😈😄

Post by “Don” of December 8, 2024 at 11:21 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Case in point: I'll disagree with people who don't see the need for the Oxford comma!

Uh oh! 😈😏

LOL! Bring it on! 😄

COMMA



RESOLVING AMBIGUITY
SINCE 1905.

I won't derail this thread any more, but one example:
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/09/us/...trnd/index.html>

Post by “Cassius” of December 8, 2024 at 2:08 PM

It should cheer all our regulars to know that Don and I are in complete agreement on the Oxford Comma! 😊