

Why isn't "satisfaction" the guide of life?

Post by "Julia" of December 15, 2024 at 6:32 PM

Hello everyone 😊

a little while ago, [I noted how "satisfaction" seems to help me](#) do proper calculus and helps me to follow through on it; both to forgo immediate (but empty) pleasures, and to work towards delayed gratifications (see post #4 in linked thread). Since then, I'm wondering about the difference of "satisfaction" versus (katastematic) pleasure.

Can you please give me a (hypothetical) example for why "satisfaction" (as opposed to: "pleasure") as the guide of life comes short of, passes by, or otherwise misses the goalpost? Isn't satisfaction exactly what "net pleasure" is? What's the difference between satisfaction, and a pleasure I enjoy remembering? What's the difference between pleasures I enjoy remembering versus those that brought me net pleasure? Isn't it the same?

Isn't the amount of satisfaction gained what makes the key difference between unnatural/limitless/corrosive desires, natural-but-unnecessary, and natural desires? Meeting natural desires is always satisfying, meeting unnatural desires is never satisfying, and the satisfaction of meeting natural-but-unnecessary desires is smaller, the stronger the expectation/dependence/addiction to the unnecessary substance/action is (which makes them a slippery slope).

Do the sources contrast "satisfaction" with another term (such as "pleasure") somewhere?

Thank you 😊

Post by "Cassius" of December 15, 2024 at 7:20 PM

Here's one way of looking at that question:

Epicurus held that the only thing given by Nature to determine what to choose and what to avoid is the feeling of (1) pleasure or (2) pain. This means literally everything referencing desirability or undesirability falls under one of these two categories:

The division into two categories is stated in Diogenes Laertius 10:34 : "The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to

nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined.”

It is also stated in more detail by Torquatus in Book One of Cicero's On Ends at 30:

Quote

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, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

- Torquatus in "On Ends" by Cicero [Book 1:30]

As to every evaluation of desirability or undesirability falling under one of these two categories we have this also from Torquatus:

Quote

Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.”

- On Ends Book One, 38 :

There are many others on how Epicurus equates pleasure with absence of pain, but on the first question ("Why is "pleasure" stated as the ultimate goal rather than some other term?") among the most important answers to that would be that meaningfulness and satisfaction and other desirable emotions all fall within "pleasure." As a philosopher Epicurus giving the most general

term first, in response to other general terms advanced by opposing schools. "Pleasure" stands in contrast to other general terms like "virtue" or "piety" which represent other major alternatives to "feeling" in competition for the title of "ultimate good."

It's also important to ask whether Epicurus advised any particular "type" of pleasure as the most desirable. Here I would say that he does give observations as to which desires will cost the most in pain to pursue, but Epicurus also says that we will sometimes choose pain in order to achieve a pleasure that is greater. Epicurus also says that sometimes we will die for a friend, so undergoing pain or even giving up life is not out of the question when circumstances require.

But when you drop back to the general Epicurean view of the world, in which there are no supernatural gods nor sources of absolute morality that apply to all times, peoples, and places, in the end Epicurus is saying that each person has to look to their own feelings and just what they will be happiest with achieving. Some will choose a quiet life, but that is not at all required by the analysis that Epicurus is describing. All that is required is to realize that you will eventually die and forever after cease to exist, and whatever experiences you decide to value must be achieved while you are alive.

And the general advice that Epicurus gave in the letter to Menoecus included this - to seek the "most pleasant" life:

Quote

But the many at one moment shun death as the greatest of evils, at another (yearn for it) as a respite from the (evils) in life. (But the wise man neither seeks to escape life) nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant. - Epicurus Letter to Menoecus 126

Post by "Julia" of December 15, 2024 at 7:50 PM

This explains nicely why pleasure is *the goal*, but it does not explain why it should also be *the guide* towards that goal...? 🤔

Isn't aiming for satisfaction going to result in the maximum pleasure? What's the difference between hedonic calculus and making sure you're as satisfied as possible in as many areas of life as possible? To help me see the difference, can you give me a counterexample, where my choice of words would be misleading?

I would argue that newborns tend to be more about immediate gratification (little pleasure right now; Cyrenaic), whereas older animals (including humans) shift towards delayed gratification (to maximise pleasure over time according to predicted future; Epicurean), and I would further argue that the sensation of success in that latter process – that is: the sensation accompanying the pleasure derived from successfully executed hedonic calculus – is called satisfaction (or pleasure of reward). Satisfaction is the pleasure of reward, the pleasure of hedonic calculus done well (eg: made a plan, came through, no regrets).

If one specific pleasure is the indicator of how well I compute and follow through with hedonic calculus, then doesn't that specific pleasure become *my guide* (towards maximising the net sum of all pleasure, which is still *my goal*)?

In my own experience: When I initially said "OK, let's maximise pleasure!" that worked well, but it remained very hard to start, let alone complete unpleasant tasks (for more pleasure later). The general pleasure (of all types except satisfaction) I predicted I would gain was insufficient to motivate me (even for unpleasant but ordinary tasks that are sensible, necessary, even urgent); however, focusing specifically on the satisfaction I predicted I would feel after each potential course of action, it became much clearer to me which course of action is correct, and also only then could the predicted general pleasure really unfold and push towards motivating me, too. It's as if predicted satisfaction turns predicted pleasure into present motivation. With that, satisfaction became the guide, did it not?

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2024 at 8:54 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

Isn't aiming for satisfaction going to result in the maximum pleasure?

It won't if you consciously lower your desires so that they are satisfied, but those desires are less than you could have achieved if you set your sights higher and pursued what you were capable of achieving. This is the problem of the ascetic view -- the best way to achieve no pleasure is not to try for any.

Of course, i wouldn't say that it's illegitimate by nature to set your goals low and work to achieve them so you can say that you are "satisfied." There's no way by nature to say that that's wrong, as it could give that type of person 100% pleasure if they lower their sights and also experience no pain. But many people, and I would say most people, would look at the missed opportunity of pleasures that could have been achieved at a reasonable cost in pain and have regret - a form of pain - that they did not use their lives more aggressively.

So this points out to me that when Epicurus was talking about the concept of absence of pain, he was talking about a concept first and foremost. [PD09](#) talks about how pleasures can differ in duration, location of the body, and intensity. That's a different perspective than simply saying "I have pure pleasure because I have no pain." I think Torquatus' explanation makes clear that saying that your pleasure is undiluted by pain, which makes it the "highest" pleasure, doesn't answer the question of exactly *what* you should be doing with your time.

Every person has to answer what they want to do with their time for themselves, but as for my view of what's possible to me in what time I have, I am going to pursue "the greatest pleasure" possible to me, even if there is a mixture of pain involved, and I am not going to consider "the greatest pleasure" to be achievable by lowering my activities to a bare minimum so I can say I achieved them and I am therefore "satisfied."

Yes I'd like to say that I satisfied my goal of achieving the greatest pleasure possible to me, but I would not sacrifice the attainment of many of them simply because I may not succeed in attaining "all" of them.

That's the kind of problem I would see with placing "satisfaction" as either my goal or my guide.

[Quote from Julia](#)

If one specific pleasure is the indicator of how well I compute and follow through with hedonic calculus, then doesn't that specific pleasure become my guide (towards maximising the net sum of all pleasure, which is still my goal)?

I would say 'yes' to this question, but that's exactly why I would not let the pleasure of "satisfaction" -- which is a pleasure, no doubt --- be my guide. Yes I would like to say at my time of departure that I am satisfied, but paradoxically I don't think it would be possible for me to say at the end that I was satisfied if I had set "being satisfied" as my guide all along the way. That role belongs to "pleasure," which has many other very valuable facets besides "satisfaction."

This is a good exchange of ideas on an important topic.

Post by "Julia" of December 15, 2024 at 9:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Of course, i wouldn't say that it's illegitimate by nature to set your goals low and work to achieve them so you can say that you are "satisfied." There's no way by nature to say that that's wrong, as it could give that type of person 100% pleasure if they lower their sights and also experience no pain. But many people, and I would say most people, would look at the missed opportunity of pleasures that could have been achieved at a reasonable cost in pain and have regret - a form of pain - that they did not use their lives more aggressively.

Oh, wow – yes, needlessly lowering my bar would cause so much regret 😬 that I never even considered it!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes I would like to say at my time of departure that I am satisfied, but paradoxically I don't think it would be possible for me to say at the end that I was satisfied if I had set "being satisfied" as my guide all along the way.

That's very true! I don't think I could have come up with that – it is very compelling. Thank you! 👍😊

Something else came to mind: *Satisfaction* is the pleasure of successful *Choice*, whereas *Relief* is the pleasure of successful *Avoidance* -- so maybe it worked so well for me, because looking for Satisfaction forced me to look for Choice (instead of staying overly focused on Avoidance). It feels quite right now, and would imply that simply sticking to "Pleasure is the guide and goal, and Julia has to especially remember her *Choices!*" means I can reap the benefits without risking the dangers 😎

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2024 at 9:46 PM

After all that i do want to agree that *Dis*satisfaction is definitely a pain, and I certainly want to reduce it to a minimum. But I think what we are circling around here is the philosophical point made by expressions such as not being able to serve two masters.

Allusions to multitasking computers aside, it makes sense that ultimately you can have only one goal, one guide, that takes precedence over the others. i suppose the multitasking computers reference helps realize that "life comes at you fast" and you constantly have to make adjustments in how you calculate what you choose and avoid. From the perspective that constant adjustments are required, I think that's where you get to the practical conclusion that

the best label for the goal is simply "pleasure" rather than combining the word pleasure with any modifier.

If you don't properly identify what that one overarching goal or guide is, then you are going to have trouble. I think that's what is meant by considering the real purpose, and then we check our progress toward that real purpose against the data we get from the senses - in this case, primarily the feelings of pleasure and pain.

[PD22](#). We must consider both the real purpose, and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.

Post by “Julia” of December 16, 2024 at 12:55 PM

I agree, except I'd avoid conflating goal and guide *from the start*, because I think there is additional value in addressing both separately at first.

The way I perceive my life, it feels like the goal and guide are usually different; eg: "My goal is qualifying for a good job, my guide is the feedback during training", "My goal is a fat 401k, my guide is a spreadsheet and some graphs". However, it seems like this is not typically the case when the goal is a feeling: "My goal is a happy marriage, and my guide is how happy we are now", "My goal is to overcome anxiety, my guide is how anxious I still am now".

Recognising the identity of goal and guide is a pattern with feeling-based goals, and seeing the dangers involved in using alternative guides ("Aim for satisfaction, and you'll get dissatisfied regret about what could have been") helps me be more firm in where I stand - thank you 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2024 at 2:45 PM

I'd also observe that in your examples you are referring to medium-term or milestone goals, which will differ from individual to individual. In contrast, on a philosophical level, the generalization that (should) apply to everyone is that their general goal should be "pleasure" or "a pleasurable life."

I continue to think it is best to look at Epicurus in this philosophical way: He's setting up "Pleasure" as against "virtue" or "piety" as general goals. We could go down a long list of

"wisdom" or "knowledge" or "satisfaction" or whatever as more precise terms than "virtue," but I would say in Epicurean terms no goal is worth having or guide is worth following unless it aims at "pleasure" as the ultimate good.

Yes Epicurus has some very good practical advice about *how* to pursue pleasure, but the real heavy lifting that I would say most of his writing is focusing on is establishing *that* pleasure is the goal, and the specific recommendations are in support of the goal of showing that pleasure is achievable and reasonable to be the goal.

Not saying that you are Julia, but I think it's a significant problem that many people are reading their own definition into Epicurus' view of pleasure, and then taking him to be telling them how to achieve their own limited goals. In contrast, Epicurus didn't take for granted that pleasure is the goal, and many of his specific statements about pleasure can easily be misapplied (as do those who practice asceticism) if they think that his explanation of the general goal is specifically applicable to what they themselves think is "pleasure."

Post by “Julia” of December 21, 2024 at 9:53 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[...] many people are reading their own definition into Epicurus' view of pleasure, and then taking him to be telling them how to achieve their own limited goals. In contrast, [...] many of his specific statements about pleasure can easily be misapplied (as do those who practice asceticism) if they think that his explanation of the general goal is specifically applicable to what they themselves think is "pleasure."

I agree. I would just add that it's natural for many people that the specific causes them to question the general ("Hey, this went well! Why don't we always do that?"), that it is natural to have questions or doubts in various ways, and that ancient Epicureans expected that, which is why so much is devoted to the general principles of finding the right answers. So, I would stress this point: The fault of those you mentioned is not that they thought at all - their mistake is that they applied improper methods in their thinking 😊

(This focus is related to [that mathematics analogy](#) I made regarding the nature of Epicurean dogmatism.)

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 21, 2024 at 2:10 PM

[Quote from Julia](#)

Isn't satisfaction exactly what "net pleasure" is?

I note in [Bailey Fragment 68](#) that Epicurus criticizes those who cannot [ἀρκεῖται](#) (*árkeîtai*, a middle-passive inflection of [ἀρκέω](#)) "**be satisfied**" with [τὸ τῆς φύσεως τέλος](#) (*tò tês phúseōs télos*) or "**the goal of nature**", which, as we know from Diogenes, *hēdonēn einai telos* ("**The goal is pleasure**"). Being able to attain a state of *satisfaction* or even, choosing my words carefully, *fulfillment* (proverbially, "having filled one's cup of pleasure") seems appropriate in this case.

I personally think of (the notion of) the gods as being "ceaselessly-satisfied".

Post by "Julia" of December 24, 2024 at 10:17 AM

Yes! And also: This maintains the distinction between the goal (pleasure), the guide (pleasure), and the-thing-to-be-attained (satisfaction/fulfillment). To me, their interaction is rather peculiar: One is aiming for (goal) and following (guide) one thing (pleasure), and then attains that thing plus another (satisfaction/fulfillment), but if one were to aim for or follow the other, would (quite possibly) attain neither (as Cassius said earlier: "I don't think it would be possible for me to say at the end that I was satisfied if I had set "being satisfied" as my guide all along the way").

This analogy helped me wrap my head around it; maybe it helps someone else, so here we go: If you lived in a remote cabin, satisfaction/fulfillment could mean having a shed full of firewood (→ filled one's cup of pleasure) for winter. However, if that's so, you would not aim for having a shed full of firewood, because that could mislead you into building a very tiny shed and/or trick you into never using any of the wood you chopped down years and years ago. Instead, you would aim for making as many logs/billets (pleasure) as you can (goal), and let your method be guided by how many you get done (guide).