

All Pleasure Is Desirable, Because It Is Pleasing To Us, But Is All Pleasure *Equally* Desirable?

Post by “Cassius” of May 5, 2018 at 6:10 AM

All pleasure may be desirable, because it is pleasure, but does that observation mean that all pleasure is EQUALLY desirable? I don't think that is the correct conclusion. And this would not be because of some outside standard of virtue that some pleasures are more "noble" than others, but as simple as observing that some pleasures are more long-lasting, or intense, than others, under our individual circumstances.

(This comment came out of [the thread discussing Hercules](#), but it deserves its own thread because of the importance of the question. DeWitt talks about the "fullness of pleasure" but that does not mean that all pleasure is interchangeable, does it?)

Here I think we need to consider PD9 "If every pleasure had been capable of accumulation, not only over time but also over the entire body or at least over the principal parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ from one another."

Post by “Pivot” of May 7, 2018 at 2:52 AM

PD3 states "Pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of all sources of pain. When such pleasure is present, for as long as it lasts, there is no cause of physical nor mental pain present - nor of both together."

So therefore, to say that some pleasures are more pleasurable than others is to say that some pleasures are better capable of removing sources of pain than others.

To make this claim would mean that complete freedom from pain is unattainable, because surely the only pleasure capable of the utter annihilation of any pain would be that perfect pleasure which does not exist. Is this the correct implication?

Post by “Cassius” of May 7, 2018 at 6:48 AM

Welcome to the forum! Very interesting questions. On first thought:

1. Pleasures differ, certainly in intensity and duration and probably in other ways as well. Also, pleasure does not exist in the air apart from things / experiences that we find pleasing, and certainly some things we find pleasing are more efficient at removing certain types of pain than others.

2. I would say that for a human complete freedom from pain IS unattainable, at least over any significant period of time. The part of your point beginning "because surely..." seems to me to be a false deduction from the meaning of "absence of pain," which I contend to be (even in concept) only a state of unadulterated combination of ordinary pleasure. However your question is excellent because it exposes an inherent conceptual fragility with the "absence of pain is a state other and higher than ordinary pleasure" construct.

But I say this is "only on first thought" and i will be very interested in your further comment. I consider my point 1 to be firm, my point 2 is less so at least in part because point 2 is more abstract.

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2018 at 7:11 AM

Pending your response Pivot, let me emphasize that I believe the key to unwrapping this excellent question is "pleasure does not exist in the air apart from things / experiences that we find pleasing." Pleasures do not exist "in the air" waiting for us to come across them and experience them. It seems to me that "pleasure" is the name we give to any number of experiences which our faculty of pleasure at any particular moment tells us is "pleasing" - meaning, our faculty of feeling tells us that this experience is desirable in and of itself.

And because experiences are innumerable in type, the only sense in which "perfect pleasure" exists is when our total experience of feeling, which generally contains some combination of pleasures and pains like jellybeans in a jar (distinct, but taking up place in the jar), contains only pleasurable jelly beans and no painful jelly beans. Now I think this definition of "perfect pleasure" can exist for at least short periods, but viewed in this way "perfect pleasure" is not a single jelly bean of some unusually potent type which can be snatched from the air or otherwise exist in human experience. Human experience is limited to vessels full of pleasures from which all pains have been (temporarily) eliminated.

And again, in my view, the real purpose of this discussion to Epicurus was to illustrate "the" goal, and to show a goal that met Platonic/other objections that pleasure could not be the goal because it can always be increased. When we take into account that a human life is like a

vessel / jar, and that it has a definite limit in size which cannot be expanded, then we have a construction of "fullness of pleasure" which serves as a conceptual framework to illustrate our goal for life.

I look forward to continuing this discussion because the issues are so important. Also, I hope we will get others to weigh in on this as soon as they can, as well.

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2018 at 8:21 AM

To continue adding to thoughts here, it has been suggested to me by a friend that certainly the natural and necessary pleasures are not interchangeable. Each one has to be enjoyed to the maximum, assuming that this is possible.

I then responded to my friend: "Ok I certainly agree on interchangeability. But perhaps the greater question is: "What in Epicurean philosophy would tell us to enjoy wine (for example) when it is available without outweighing pain rather than stick to our water all the time?" Certainly parts of the letter to Menoeceus COULD be read to say that, but I do not believe that to be the meaning. And I presume you don't either - none of us do that. But we do not want to accept the implication that we are poor Epicureans in doing so. What Epicurean principle(s) are best used to override that implication, which is so popular today?"

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2018 at 8:40 AM

Why I see this question as important: It seems to me that this question is sort of a variation of that quote from DeWitt where the Platonist said "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good and ends by emptying pleasure of all positive content?"

The twist here is "What, in a word, is to be said of a philosophy that begins by regarding pleasure as the only positive good, but ends by seeking the minimal amount of pleasure that is available without any exertion?"

If some pleasures are greater than others, then surely some pleasures are worth many multiples of the pain they require, and given the shortness of life should we not be pursuing those pleasures with all the vigor we can put into it?

And that is what I see as the deeper implication of your question, Pivot. If no pleasure is any more pleasing than any other, then the shortness of life is irrelevant, and it makes no difference whether we derive our pleasures while living in a cave staring at a candle, or on the summit of a mountain taking all the awesome beauties Nature has to offer.

Post by "Pivot" of May 7, 2018 at 7:19 PM

Very interesting thoughts Cassius. I will do my best to try to understand them and offer an interpretation.

I understand what you are saying with the jelly bean analogy. It is a mistake to rank pleasures based on their capacity to achieve freedom from pain, because the definition of pain is suffering, and water and wine are both equally capable of removing thirst. However, conceding this another problem comes up:

That "pleasure reaches its maximum limit at freedom from pain." If this is the case, pleasures must be ranked based on their capacity to achieve freedom from pain. But as you have illustrated with the water-wine example, two pleasures which are equally capable of removing the pain of thirst differ in their ability to please. And still, other drinks may be more pleasurable than wine which are equally capable of removing pain, and so forth. So why is it that pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of pain, unless one can claim that any increase in pleasure is simply an increase in freedom from pain (which seems untrue)?

A nuance I have found in our discussion is the difference between "perfect pleasure" and "perfect freedom from pain." It seems to me they are the same according to PD3; however, what of the man whose IV is injected with morphine, versus the man who is satisfied minimally in that all of his sources of pain are eliminated? One man is experiencing greater pleasure than the other.

Perhaps it is that, practically in one's life, it is a mistake to pursue pleasure beyond freedom from pain, because both the toil to achieve such pleasures and the anxieties accompanying them will render them, in the end, "un-free" from pain. Therefore we should let them come to us, but we should not seek them.

I would contest then the idea that the vessel of human life cannot be expanded. Or if it cannot, that perfect pleasure exists when it is full. If pleasure is simply dopamine, then the amount we experience can range anywhere from a drink of water to methamphetamine. If freedom from pain is when the vessel is full - and absent of pain - then the pleasure of methamphetamine would somehow overflow the vessel, which is not possible. Thus it must either need to be able to expand, or the vessel must be large enough to allow for the pleasures of even the most

intense sort.

It seems to me the vessel is extremely large, and freedom from pain is when the only items in the vessel are pleasurable ones, and no painful ones remain. Although the vessel is not full, attempting to fill the vessel with excess pleasures would only result in pain in the long run, as the drug mentioned would. So it is not a problem that the vessel is not full, it is enough that it consists of no pain.

Post by "Cassius" of May 7, 2018 at 10:10 PM

Thank you for the very detailed continuation. I will try to do each point justice, but I think our different conclusions stem from very different premises.

Several times in your comments I observe comments which to me seem to focus on pain. For example, I would not agree with "pleasures must be ranked based on their capacity to achieve freedom from pain." I see pleasures as being very subjective, and I would not presume to judge someone else's ranking. If someone wants to give up years of life in order to spend five minutes "on the mountaintop" because he finds that pleasure so intense as to be worthwhile, I would not presume to second-guess that choice, and I do not believe Epicurus would either. "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

So when you write "because both the toil to achieve such pleasures and the anxieties accompanying them will render them, in the end, "un-free" from pain" I simply look at the goal totally differently. The goal as I understand Epicurus is pleasure - which is not an abstraction or a state, but pleasureable living - the accumulating of common ordinary pleasurable experiences. I wish to purchase those with as little pain as possible, but as a human being it is not possible to live without pain. I minimize it to the extent possible, but I am not here to escape pain as my primary goal - my primary goal is to experience pleasure, without which no pain would be worthwhile.

As for this "I would contest then the idea that the vessel of human life cannot be expanded" I should be clear. When I say "cannot be expanded" I mean simply that at SOME point it is ended by death. Within that scope there is a huge variety of length and experiences - some never escape childhood, some live past 100. There is a limit set by death, but a wide variety of time within that.

Also I never would see it fair to speak in these terms: "If pleasure is simply dopamine" While it

is true that the effect of pleasure is to crowd out pain, that is not the PURPOSE of pleasure. Pleasure is desirable in itself; the crowding out of pain is secondary.

"So it is not a problem that the vessel is not full, it is enough that it consists of no pain." And this is the position that calls out to me ; "Then why not commit suicide?" There is certainly no pain in being dead, and if "absence of pain" taken literally and without reference to pleasure, is the overriding goal, then a quick death is exactly the ticket.

All discussions like this are extremely helpful - at least to me - because this is a huge difference in perspective. People who come from such different perspectives may never agree, but it is very helpful to articulate the difference in perspective as clearly as possible.

(I am sorry I was interrupted during this post but I think my reply is at least partly coherent.)

But I do want to repeat that I think what we are discussing is the most important topic possible for people studying Epicurus to discuss.

Post by "Pivot" of May 8, 2018 at 2:22 AM

I focus on pain because of Epicurus' idea that maximum pleasure is freedom from pain. He has stated "For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid[...]" I would agree with you that pleasures are very subjective, so a universal ranking would be inappropriate. You bring up an interesting point in the man toiling five years for five minutes on the mountaintop.

The five minutes is likely in the "natural but unnecessary for happiness" category. Didn't Epicurus also believe that we should not seek that which is unnecessary for happiness, but we should enjoy them if they were to come to us? I would differentiate this from toiling for family, friends, or a fulfilling career, because these things may very well be necessary for happiness for some. There is also an interpretation of the "natural/unnatural and necessary/unnecessary" categories, which bases them on survival instead of on happiness, but both are valid (which Epicurus recognizes in his letter to Menoeceus). The man toiling for five years for this brief pleasure of the mountaintop is lacking a tranquility of mind for these five years in doing so. A desire which would result in five years of the lack of ἀταραξία seems to be one that Epicurus would second-guess.

If the goal for Epicurus is pleasure, and if "pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of all sources of pain," is the goal not then complete freedom from pain?

To remove all sources of pain means to be left only with pleasure if our lives have any substance whatsoever. I think even the most unfortunate of lives do not consist of solely pain. So the removal of all sources of pain would result in the baseline of pleasure, which death would not fulfill. There is also intrinsic pleasure in being free from pain. If I may quote Lucretius:

"Sweet it is, when the wind whips the water on the great sea,
to gaze from the land upon the great struggles of another,
not because it is a delightful pleasure for anyone to be distressed,
but because it is sweet to observe those evils which you lack yourself."

This is the sort of pleasure which death or sleep could not provide.

I erred if I tried to argue that freedom from pain in the absence of any pleasure whatsoever is desirable. But I do think freedom from pain always results in pleasure in any practical sense.

Let me know what you think about this, I always appreciate the different perspective.

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2018 at 8:47 AM

I'll make notes and comment as we go through:

1. As usual, this is the issue: "Epicurus' idea that maximum pleasure is freedom from pain." -- Our disagreement is that I believe Epicurus clearly did not mean this statement in the way you interpret it, in terms of "every respect equivalent." As PD3 says, "The magnitude (quantity) of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain." "Absence of pain" is a measure of quantity, and quantity is only one aspect of pleasure, and not the most important aspect. "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

2. "Didn't Epicurus also believe that we should not seek that which is unnecessary for happiness, but we should enjoy them if they were to come to us?" To this I would say NO - if by the question you mean this to be THE overriding rule. It is clearly "a" rule by which we should structure our lives to be sure that we do not enslave ourselves to desires that we cannot achieve. But "greater pleasure" is the goal and even that rule - and all choices - are governed by the final goal - greater pleasure. "And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but will often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater

pleasure."

3 - "If the goal for Epicurus is pleasure, and if "pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of all sources of pain," is the goal not then complete freedom from pain? " -- YES BUT - only in terms of quantity! If one confuses quantity for quality, then one has confused the goal just as surely as the stoic who confuses "virtue" for the goal.

4 - Now, as to being free from pain being pleasurable, we do indeed agree, but the overriding premise here is "for the living." This is where DeWitt emphasises the point that pleasure, pain, etc. have no meaning except for the living! If we are alive there is nothing mysterious about what we are doing - we are at least going about the daily affairs of life in which we find pleasure if we allow ourselves to and if our circumstances do not prevent it. Clearly, life is worth living at whatever stage we find ourselves, unless we are forced to be in continuing unbearable pain without hope of relief. Life is desirable " And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It would be easy for him to do so once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in jest, his words are foolishness as those who hear him do not believe."

5 - Now here you are separating yourself from the more crusading (😊) of those who focus on "absence of pain" as the full Epicurean definition of "the highest pleasure." I refer to when you say: "I erred if I tried to argue that freedom from pain in the absence of any pleasure whatsoever is desirable. But I do think freedom from pain always results in pleasure in any practical sense." My observation is that most of the time the "no pain" argument is combined with the katastematic/static pleasure argument, and the position taken is that "absence of pain" ("katastematic pleasure") is some new and higher "state" totally separate from the normal pleasures of life, totally separate from any sensual pleasure that can be named, or in your term a "practical" pleasure - and in fact - not a sensual pleasure itself. If you are not going in that direction it will not be necessary to elaborate, but for anyone else reading this thread, this argument is frequently found on the internet, but the opposite position is taken in Boris [Nikolsky's "Epicurus on Pleasure,"](#) in the section on Epicurus in Gosling & Taylors "The Greeks on Pleasure" and in various other resources that can be pointed to [here](#).

Thank you again for another useful exchange. Much of this turns on one's perspective on pleasure, and the closer we examine that issue the better off we are. As I type this I seem to remember that you made a comment that I should have addressed with this:

Oh - here it is - you wrote: "So why is it that pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of pain, unless one can claim that any increase in pleasure is simply an increase in freedom from pain (which seems untrue)?"

I think that is a KEY point that also leads to very divergent views. To me, it is crucially foundational to emphasize that Epicurus stressed that there are ONLY two categories of feelings - pleasure and pain. In any measurement system, if the universe is composed of only two components, then in rigorous terms YES - the absence of one IS exactly the measure of the presence of the other, and vice versa. I believe that if one starts with this canonical proposition a lot of confusion is addressed. "Pleasure" = "absence of pain" becomes an obvious truism and absolutely non mystical, just as in the jelly bean jar analogy one can judge the quantity by saying "jelly beans" = "absence of air" and "absence of air" = "jelly beans." YES, this is true in terms of quantity, but the effect of eating air is much different than the effect of eating jelly beans!

IF one starts with this proposition, which I believe derives from the logical arguments that Epicurus was using against the Platonists (as referenced [here](#)) then the "problem" of evaluating the "absence of pain" statements in the letter to Menoecus and PD3 evaporates. As I see it, the reason PD3 is so highly placed is for exactly that reason. The PDs were ordered largely in terms of priority of who most urgently needed to be defeated in argument (in education).

PD1 - the religionists who say that god controls human affairs must be defeated by showing that gods are unconcerned with men.

PD2 - pretty much everyone who argues that death is a state of suffering to be avoided at all costs (such as by the adoption of false philosophies of virtue) must be defeated by showing that death is absence of sensation, and all evil comes through sensation.

PD3 - the Platonists and others who argue that pleasure cannot be the guide of life because it can never be satisfied, that there is always a "higher" amount to which we would like to achieve, and that pleasure can always be improved must be defeated by showing a logical argument that there IS a limit to the pleasure which can be experienced in human life, and that the limit is the total elimination of pain from our experience. This becomes the logical "goal" which replaces serving gods, virtue, etc as the statement of the "divine guide of life" as Lucretius called it.

I think the problem has largely arisen because the context of PD3 - the necessity to meet and defeat the arguments of Plato in [Philebus](#) and elsewhere, have dropped from sight, and people no longer see the relevance of the argument. Thus the "absence of pain" argument has been left as a "floating abstraction" without anchoring to practicality, leaving it a ready tool for those who want to distort it into a Stoic sword. Obviously this problem existed in Cicero's time as well, since he makes use of it to argue that Epicurus was confusing, but back then everyone knew that Epicureans embraced "ordinary" pleasures and lived active lives (reference Atticus, Cassius, and Lucretius and Epicurus themselves in terms of their crusading spirit). But as the texts were lost and Stoic/Christian ethical viewpoints took power by fire and sword, the essential context fell further and further away to the point where today it is a major challenge to even get anyone to consider it.

Post by “Daniel Van Orman” of May 10, 2018 at 8:05 PM

"To me, it is crucially foundational to emphasize that Epicurus stressed that there are ONLY two categories of feelings - pleasure and pain. In any measurement system, if the universe is composed of only two components, then in rigorous terms YES - the absence of one IS exactly the measure of the presence of the other, and vice versa."

I have to disagree with this.

There are many times I think pleasure and pain come together, such as when one feels both happy and sad at the same time.

Using the jelly bean analogy, it started with pleasurable jelly beans and painful jelly beans, not one type of jelly bean and air. Two jars could have only painful jelly beans, but one jar could have twice as many painful jelly beans as the other.

To use a different analogy (I hope this will not be confusing), consider someone colorblind to the color blue, so they only see red and green. More red does not undo green, but blends with green to make yellow. Less green and twice that amount of red blends to make orange. However, one cannot truly see red at its maximum if green is in the way since they would see shades of yellow, gold, or orange and not red.

I realize this perspective may be in violation of PD3. That is likely because I do not understand PD3 nor "the Platonists and others who argue that pleasure cannot be the guide of life because it can never be satisfied".

It sounds like both of you have learned much from your discussion. However, I think this thread has drifted from its original topic: "All pleasure may be desirable, . . . but is all pleasure is equally desirable?".

I think Epicurus taught different pleasures have different desirabilities.

One subject this is brought up is bodily pleasures and mental pleasures: "The flesh receives as unlimited the limits of pleasure; and to provide it requires unlimited time. But the mind, intellectually grasping what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of the future, procures a complete and perfect life, and we have no longer any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless the mind does not shun pleasure, and even when circumstances make death imminent, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life" ([PD20](#))

In other texts, he seems to point out more desirable pleasures:

"To those who are able to reason it out, the highest and surest joy is found in the stable health of the body and a firm confidence in keeping it" (Peter Saint-Andre's Selected Fragments, 68, <http://monadnock.net/epicurus/fragments.html>).

"The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one" (Vatican Sayings, 78).

What do you guys think?

Post by "Cassius" of May 10, 2018 at 9:26 PM

"I think Epicurus taught different pleasures have different desirabilities." <<< Yes Daniel and you and I are totally in agreement with that. I think that Pivot, however, was stating a different position, at least initially.

Now here - "There are many times I think pleasure and pain come together, such as when one feels both happy and sad at the same time." That is definitely the case, but the issue I think Epicurus was aiming at is whether the two (pleasure and pain) are a mixture into a new third substance, or whether they retain their discrete qualities (sort of like oil and water, which can be shaken together but don't really mix.

Before I go further on that point let me ask you this: Have you read Norman DeWitt's Epicurus and His Philosophy which is discussed throughout this site? if you have not, I urge you to get that book, as it presents Epicurean philosophy in a systematic way that I don't think is equaled by any other book. Of course you may disagree with some of its interpretations, and of course you may disagree with Epicurus on something, but it's not possible to decide whether you agree or disagree til you really understand Epicurus' position.

Having said that, my reading from DeWitt and elsewhere indicates that this issue of mixing of pleasure and pain is very deep, and arises from arguments started by Plato and others to which Epicurus was responding. Possibly you are not concerned with the issue of "only two - pleasure and pain" as much as you are concerned with whether they "mix." In order to understand that you will need to fall back to what Plato was arguing AGAINST the idea of using pleasure and pain as the guide of life, and that is more complicated than I can address in this post.

Let me know if you have the time and inclination to pursue that, because if you do (and I very much recommend it) there are a couple of sources you will want to read. one of them is Gosling and Taylor's "The Greeks on pleasure" which is not easy to find, but is available through any library. that book traces the history of the arguments about pleasure from the beginning up through Epicurus, and I think it is pretty much indispensable to understanding the big picture.

But I would not recommend you start there - if you have not read it, I recommend starting with DeWitt, after which you will have the global view and then be in much better position to check this very detailed issue.

Also, SOME of the aspects of this issue are discussed [on my page here](#) but I have not succeeded in polishing that to the point it needs to be - it is currently more of a list of points rather than a good narrative argument.

Don't let my stopping at this point in the post discourage you. If you are motivated to pursue this there are many aspects to discuss and I would like nothing more than to follow along with you as you check these sources, and I am sure I would learn from discussing it with you as you go through. This is a tremendously important issue and far too few people are interested in it.

Post by "Pivot" of May 11, 2018 at 4:09 AM

I could not agree more that this is an extremely important issue because of the implications of each of our viewpoints. It's an argument about the best way to live in the end - a life free from pain, or a life minimizing pain but striving for pleasures?

It can be reasonably assumed Epicurus underwent significant struggle and difficulty in creating and defending these doctrines which have survived for millennia. If he were to weigh freedom from pain as the highest pleasure, wouldn't he have been better off to live a withdrawn life free from all struggles?

I would say no. Perhaps to be free from pain, Epicurus NEEDED to do these things and go through these struggles (ie, natural and necessary desire). To live any other way would leave him unfulfilled and in a state of constant pain or emptiness. Perhaps his motivation was freedom from pain, too.

1. I agree that absence of pain is a measure of quantity in that the quantity of painful experiences is 0 or near 0. "But nothing is more delightful than to possess sanctuaries which are lofty, peaceful, and well fortified by the teachings of the wise" (DRN 2.7). Sanctuaries of course meaning freedom from pain. I do not think that quote from the Letter to Menoecus contradicts this. Before it reads: "The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil." I do not think this quote is saying that intensity of pleasure outweighs freedom from pain, as freedom from pain is not necessarily implied in the longer lifespan. I agree in that it says magnitude trumps length.

2. The quote "And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure" is in congruence with the

interpretation that freedom from pain is the most important consideration, I believe. Let us imagine a simple case where a man must farm wheat and slaughter cattle to have food for his family. This is a pain he chooses because the pleasure afterwards outweighs it. To be most free from pain, the man must pursue this inconvenience.

There is a distinction between types of pleasure: natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, unnatural and necessary, and unnatural and unnecessary. It is advisable to go through pain for a greater pleasure when that pleasure is natural and necessary, such as food for one's family. However, when you suggest that natural and unnecessary pleasures should be sought out, implying that it is okay to desire them, I have to disagree. I have gathered that you are a very strict utilitarian when it comes to these things - greater pleasure should always be sought and desired. I do not think Epicurus believes this - I think he believes natural and unnecessary pleasures should not be desired, nor sought except at intervals; in fact, this is one of his most beautiful and enlightening doctrines that I've come to admire. But allow me to extend an olive branch before making my argument that this is indeed what Epicurus believes: I would say that Epicurus believes that seeking for natural and unnecessary pleasures is NOT maximizing OVERALL greater pleasure.

Here is the quote which supports my argument. It is long, but you have read it before, no doubt, and I would like to put it here because it is so pertinent:

"Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win. Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips. To habituate one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune."

A costly diet would be a natural and unnecessary desire. Epicurus says here that removing the desire for unnecessary pleasures (ie, a costly diet) is a better condition because of two reasons. 1) It allows us to take pleasure in unnecessary desires at intervals, because if we no longer desire them then their deprivation will not cause pain. 2) It protects us from fortune, which is fickle.

The idea is that we will eventually grow acclimated to these unnecessary pleasures, at which point they become our baseline and no longer are as pleasing as they once were. Then the pain we invest into them is not going into a pleasure at all, but it is being invested only to free us from the pain of not having these pleasures. Which brings me to the next argument:

Your claim is that freedom from pain = pleasure. I agree that being free from pain is A pleasure. But I 100% disagree that in increasing pleasure we are becoming increasingly free from pain. Pain is a positive experience. If we break our leg, we feel pain. It is not like air in a jar, where if you remove some pleasurable experience, more pain manifests itself. That is why I disagree with the jar analogy. If I remove jelly beans (pleasurable experiences) from the jar, I create more air in the jar (pain). That is false on the face of it the way I see it. If I'm eating ice cream and I finish the ice-cream, thereby ending that pleasurable experience, am I creating pain? The jelly bean was removed, and air filled its place, so according to your model I would be creating pain by finishing my ice cream.

Forgive me also if I have argued different things in different posts - I am working these issues out and growing as I talk about them, and I wouldn't want to limit myself to something I said if I believe it to be wrong later.

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2018 at 5:55 AM

That is a very articulate post Pivot, thank you! I would first say that I think much of the importance of this question is what is "Unsaid" and thereby the possibility of confusion. I gather that you firmly equate in your mind "absence of pain" as a pleasurable experience, and, therefore, you have no issue considering the concepts to be largely interchangeable. You identify pleasure in absence of pain which therefore makes it desirable.

I do not believe that "most people" think in those terms, and because they do not the use of this phrasing is dangerous. It is my observation that "most people" today are so much under the influence of "virtue ethics" or the idea that "meaning" must come from something other than the feeling of pleasure, that they are unable to interpret "absence of pain" as anything other than a form of nihilism, which is a tremendous danger. Nihilism adds up to the negation of pleasure and the negation of life, and I believe Epicurus did or would have considered its modern form to be a major enemy.

So while I have no issue with discussing absence of pain if the premise is clear that we are talking about one of many forms of pleasure, I think that "many" people are not in fact doing that - those who do it intentionally are using deceptive wording to imply that there is something in life they believe is more desirable than pleasurable feeling that is separate and distinct from pleasure. And thus they reconcile Epicurus with stoicism or idealism or whatever is their favored form of "meaning."

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2018 at 6:05 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/428-all-pleasure-is-desirable-because-it-is-pleasing-to-us-but-is-all-pleasure-equal/>

So given my last post I do agree with much or most of what you wrote, which I see as very appropriate comparison of costs and benefits . As I see it, however, the issue where this discussion helps the most is in articulating and preparing for the question that I think exists in every new student of Epicurus when they first hear the discussion and think to themselves "What does he mean by 'absence of pain?'"

I think unless we take great pains to clarify this early, most normal and healthy young people will naturally be put off by what they will see as the apparent anti pleasure pro ascetic bias of the terminology, which conveys a meaning that I do not think Epicurus in fact intended to convey.

Choose pleasurable activities carefully so as not to suffer unnecessary significant pain that in your context "outweighs" the pleasure? Absolutely YES.

Choose pleasurable activities ONLY if you can be sure that NO pain will result from them? Absolutely NOT, and that implication has to be firmly dismissed.

Post by “Pivot” of May 11, 2018 at 10:34 AM

It is very fortunate that we have reached an agreement Cassius!

I understand what you mean that it can be confusing for the new student to prioritize freedom from pain. The key is certainly in showing that this is pleasurable in itself.

There are many beautiful quotes from De Rerum Natura that outline this very eloquently. One of the strongest and most surprising implications of this is that death should not be feared. I've been studying that issue rather intensely lately, of course it is another can of worms entirely.

I very much appreciate the deep back-and-forth on this topic. It has served to make my understanding clearer and more precise, so I must thank you for the wonderful exchange.

Post by “Cassius” of May 11, 2018 at 11:19 AM

You are very welcome Pivot. As a point of information for me, what is your background (if any) in Stoicism? I am interested to know how, from your perspective, you think these ideas compare to what is commonly discussed as stoicism in particular.

Also, did you say how you found this forum? If your experience in how you found it would be of help to us in getting wider exposure for it, please let us know. Most here are from the Facebook page, but not everyone by any means, and we definitely need to expand beyond that.

Post by “Pivot” of May 11, 2018 at 12:06 PM

I used to be very attracted to the ideas of the Stoics. One of my favorite books which had a great effect on me was Seneca's Letters to Lucilius. Indeed I still find it beautiful - specifically, its arguments for why one should not worry, and its meditations on enduring pain and turmoil.

In many ways I find there would be agreement with Epicureanism. Of course, I disagree with its position of virtue as the end of action. That is unable to be reconciled. If one were to consolidate these two ends by claiming that what is virtuous for an Epicurean is what maximizes pleasure, it seems that there is much agreement.

For example, a main tenet of Stoicism is that one must order one's will to be in accord with nature. I would say Epicurus agrees with this. It is natural to pursue pleasure over pain. So ordering one's will towards nature is simply ordering it towards pleasure.

I am not very well acquainted with Stoic philosophy, indeed I have much more to learn about even Epicurean philosophy, but from my perspective I believe there to be a great deal of overlap since virtue, for an Epicurean, may very well be the end if it is what is pleasurable. Like the man who toils to provide food for his family - a virtuous act, but one that he pursues because it is pleasurable.

In fact now that I think about it, this topic is mentioned somewhat in Lucretius. I will restrain myself from quoting a paragraph since there is not a short sound-byte about it, but in Book 3 he mentions that life on earth becomes hell for he who acts outside of what is morally just: "But in this life there exists remarkable fear of punishment for remarkable misdeeds." Apart from great pain in punishment, the fear of being caught having committed a reproachable act often outweighs the pleasure attained from the act.

As for how I found the website, I believe I searched up "Epicurean forum" or something similar on Google 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 11, 2018 at 12:11 PM

Oh excellent that you found on google. I am paying for a little Google Adwords advertising so I will keep that up.

And I agree with the rest of your comments too.

Please drop by as often as you can, and especially consider starting new threads in any area of interest. Activity drives activity, and the way to be gods among men is to interact and study nature with like-minded friends! 😊

Post by “Daniel Van Orman” of May 11, 2018 at 12:26 PM

"But allow me to extend an olive branch before making my argument"

Do not worry, it is difficult to offend me. I felt no offense of any kind as I was reading your post.

I think I interpreted that quote from the Letter to Menoecus very differently. As always, please correct me if I am wrong.

I think Epicurus was not against having much, but against addicting one's self to having much. I agree with you that one should not "grow acclimated to these unnecessary pleasures, at which point they become our baseline and no longer are as pleasing as they once were".

As long as one fully appreciates having much in some pleasure (a fine taste to enjoy costly meals or a love of big TV screens or a personal library full of enjoyable literature), I think Epicurus would have been fine with them enjoying much.

I have condensed and underlined portions of the quote to better show where my thoughts are coming from.

"regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little . . . To habituate one's self, therefore, to . . . all that is needful for health, . . . enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition . . . and renders us fearless of fortune."

"Your claim is that freedom from pain = pleasure."

That is not my claim. My claim is pleasure and pain are not defined as the lack of one another - they may both be present at the same time. To clarify that point (thinking the bean jar analogy was unclear), I used an RGB color analogy: "more red does not undo green, but blends with green to make yellow". I have no idea how pleasure and pain blend. Maybe it is heterogeneous, like water and oil shaken together. Maybe it is homogeneous, like hydrogen and oxygen combining to make water.

"I 100% disagree that in increasing pleasure we are becoming increasingly free from pain."

I 100% agree with your disagreement.

"Choose pleasurable activities carefully so as not to suffer unnecessary significant pain that in your context 'outweighs' the pleasure? Absolutely YES.

Choose pleasurable activities ONLY if you can be sure that NO pain will result from them? Absolutely NOT, and that implication has to be firmly dismissed."

Teachings such as this is why I love calculus. Calculus emphasizes there are multiple variables one must consider to find the best solution to a problem. It describes nature so well.

It is great to learn so much from others on the forum! I hope I will help contribute your learning as well. 😊

Post by "Pivot" of May 11, 2018 at 1:29 PM

Daniel, I am incredibly sorry I did not mention this in my post, but the entirety of my post was a direct response to Cassius' numerated reply to my previous post. All of the "you's" and "yours" would have been addressed to Cassius there.

I do not think I have a disagreement with any of the ideas in your previous post (the one before last), except the claim that your perspective goes against PD3.

If one accepts the view that the natural and necessary pleasures are the only sort which should be actively toiled for, then one is able to make sense of PD3 (while also keeping that freedom from pain is not directly proportional to pleasure). Pursuing natural but unnecessary desires is only beneficial to do in intervals, and while it will increase our pleasure, it does not increase our overall *net* pleasure. That is what I believe PD3 is saying. "The magnitude of pleasure..." where

pleasure is net pleasure in one's life. I do not believe Epicurus means the magnitude of an INDIVIDUAL pleasure. There is a hedonist principle called the "hedonist treadmill," which is "the tendency of humans to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness despite major positive or negative events or life changes." That is along what I was attempting to say, that our baseline for freedom from pain will adjust if we continually pursue natural but unnecessary desires.

I agree with you that Epicurus was not against *having* much, but I believe he was against actively toiling for more than is necessary for one's freedom from pain. Those things which are natural but unnecessary should be enjoyed if they come to you, but not constantly sought, because 1) fortune is fickle, and 2) in attaining these pleasures through pain, we become acclimated to them and no longer enjoy them as pleasures.

In response to your statement: "As long as one fully appreciates having much in some pleasure (a fine taste to enjoy costly meals or a love of big TV screens or a personal library full of enjoyable literature), I think Epicurus would have been fine with them enjoying much."

Enjoying much is different from seeking for much in my opinion. If you win the lottery and are able to eat a lobster and steak every day at the finest restaurant, indeed you should enjoy this pleasure, but it is of the natural and unnecessary sort. The money has come to you and therefore Epicurus would not oppose you allowing those luxuries which result to wash over you. However, after enough time eating this fine dinner every day, it will become the baseline, and will no longer be enjoyed as pleasure. It will become necessary maintenance for freedom from pain.

That is why these unnecessary things should be pursued only in intervals. That is the only way to ensure maximum pleasure. From Diogenes Laertius on Epicurus:

"In his correspondence he himself mentions that he was content with plain bread and water. And again : 'Send me a little pot of cheese, that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously.' Such was the man who laid down that pleasure was the end of life. And here is the epigram in which Athenaeus eulogizes him :

Ye toil, O men, for paltry things and incessantly begin strife and war for gain ; but nature's wealth extends to a moderate bound, whereas vain judgements have a limitless range. This message Neocles' wise son heard from the Muses or from the sacred tripod at Delphi."

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2018 at 4:14 PM

My comments which I will interject - I hope it is clear to what I am responding.

(1) Pivot: "I agree with you that Epicurus was not against *having* much, but I believe he was against actively toiling for more than is necessary for one's freedom from pain." <<< I think in another thread (or maybe this one earlier) we discussed my concerns with the terminology, and this is another example. If we are Epicureans who fully endorse and do not suppress pleasure, then we equate "freedom from pain" with an experience full of active and ordinary and contemplative and mental and physical pleasures - all types, and we all understand that this is the goal. And if we accept that premise, then we don't care for additional pleasures past that point, because indeed our experience is full and anything above that would be simply variation - and not expanding our full experience of pleasure. IF, unfortunately, we don't accept the meaning of "freedom from pain" to be "pleasure" and "complete freedom from pain" to be "full pleasure," or if we are talking to non-Epicureans, then the terminology is probably dangerous and confusing. (And to be honest, even here with the three of us talking, I am not sure whether we are agreed on the fundamental point.) So just as a comment, and not as a criticism, I think we have a real challenge here to decide how to communicate - even among ourselves, with sentences like that. I hate to think we have people who will come to the forum, read "I agree with you that Epicurus was not against *having* much, but I believe he was against actively toiling for more than is necessary for one's freedom from pain," and think that this is an instruction to lie on a cot in a cave with a supply of bread and water. 😊 Tell me what you think of my concern - unnecessary, overblown, or in fact that we don't agree on what is implied with "freedom from pain"?

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2018 at 4:17 PM

Daniel: When you write "My claim is pleasure and pain are not defined as the lack of one another - they may both be present at the same time" I think you are right and that is proper phrasing. In our total experience, my head can be experiencing pleasure while my foot is in pain. In any moment we are experiencing multiple sensations, some of which are pleasurable and some painful. I write this only as a reminder of a point I made earlier that there is a very technical dispute in Plato about whether pain and pleasure can mix together to form a "third" feeling, and that if I understand correctly, Epicurus held that they do NOT mix in that way. Just keep that in mind for future reading - and I write this for others who might read the thread as much to you, Daniel, since I hope what we are doing in these threads is building discussions that will be useful for others to read for years to come!

Oh - now I see why I wrote that. Daniel you wrote: ""more red does not undo green, but blends with green to make yellow". I have no idea how pleasure and pain blend. Maybe it is heterogeneous, like water and oil shaken together. Maybe it is homogeneous, like hydrogen and oxygen combining to make water." That's the terminology that concerns me, but as you

say you are not taking a position on how or whether they "blend." That's the point to reserve for future reading and comparing to Plato's criticisms of pleasure in [Philebus](#). If you admit that they "blend" to create a new third type of feeling, as I understand it that opens up a series of logical issues which Plato will exploit against you, primarily in terms of how you will require "reason" to un-blend them, at which point you are led down a rabbit trail that reason is more important than pleasure and pain, and ultimately replaces them as the goal/guide of life. Again, that's a topic for another time, and probably another thread.

Post by "Cassius" of May 11, 2018 at 4:32 PM

OK I have created [another thread on the "blending" issue](#). I suspect that for purposes of our current discussion that issue is a tangent, and should be set aside until later, but that's one purpose of forum software like this -- we can pick up the thread and continue the discussion at any appropriate point later.

Post by "Pivot" of May 12, 2018 at 1:41 AM

Cassius: "If we are Epicureans who fully endorse and do not suppress pleasure, then we equate 'freedom from pain' with an experience full of active and ordinary and contemplative and mental and physical pleasures - all types, and we all understand that this is the goal."

I am definitely on board with you there, up until when you say "all types."

"IF, unfortunately, we don't accept the meaning of 'freedom from pain' to be 'pleasure' and 'complete freedom from pain' to be 'full pleasure,'"

I would accept this!

"I hate to think we have people who will come to the forum, read 'I agree with you that Epicurus was not against having much, but I believe he was against actively toiling for more than is necessary for one's freedom from pain,' and think that this is an instruction to lie on a cot in a cave with a supply of bread and water."

Certainly not! It would be foolish to throw away those pleasures which you are fortunate enough to have in your life. It is enough that we may be contended with lying in a cot with a supply of only bread and water, and perhaps a pot of cheese. Isn't this among the most

beautiful of Epicurus' doctrines? That in this seemingly lacking state we are more contented, even, than the Hollywood millionaire who chases fame, wealth, and fortune, the one who "flees himself, but he cannot, of course, escape the one he flees, but clings to him unwillingly and hates him because he is sick and does not understand the cause of his disease" (DRM 3.1068-1070).

To be in constant pursuit of unnecessary pleasures results in pain. This in no way suppresses pleasure - it is the only way to attain complete freedom from pain, which is the limit of pleasure. That is why that I disagree that all pleasures must be sought. Fame, wealth, and immortality are pleasures, but you agree they should not be sought. In the same way, a lobster for dinner every day can be reasonably enjoyed if you become rich or fortune befalls you; however, if you were to eat a lobster for dinner every day you would eventually become accustomed to it and it would no longer become a pleasure!

Those natural and unnecessary pleasures we should pursue in intervals. The newcomer may misinterpret this idea that "freedom from pain" should be pursued, instead falsely gleaning that Epicureanism means pursuing asceticism. And just as easily, a newcomer may misinterpret the idea that "all pleasure should be pursued," instead falsely believing that Epicureanism means pursuing empty pleasures such as wealth, fame, honor, immortality, and a host of others than one cannot begin to warn against.

My interpretation is that one should not seek out the cot with bread and water if he is better off; however, if a misfortune befalls him and he is left in a cot with nothing but bread and water, he ought to find contentment, unless there is a pleasure which he is lacking that is necessary for him to be happy.

Post by "Cassius" of May 12, 2018 at 6:33 AM

"That is why that I disagree that all pleasures must be sought." Yes as you state we are together on that. All pleasure is desirable by definition, but we certainly should not pursue those pleasures which will bring us pain that outweighs the reward.

I think what we are striving toward here is precision and clarification of terminology so that we avoid as much confusion as possible.

Eternal life, for example, is not possible for us, so to yearn after it brings pain that I cannot see to be worthwhile, and so we work to avoid that pain by study of nature and understanding of our natural limits.

On the other hand, life is desirable, so we work to protect and enjoy our lives to the extent possible too.

Both are at the same time true, and should be obvious, yet because of centuries of confusion and false religion and nihilism they are not obvious to many people. And those who are confused can turn out to be enemies and harm us, or simply be lost to us as friends who could otherwise have enhanced our happiness and theirs too.

So it seems to me much of the benefit and purpose of Epicurus' work was to move in that direction and present a framework which people can understand and use productively. And one of the best ways we can do that is to talk among each other, sharpen our own presentations, and then enhance our own lives by extending that message to others (thus our recent exchange on graphic memes, blogging, etc.)

That is one aspect of the usefulness of a forum like this - to serve as sort of a training camp where people can get basic ideas arranged in a proper foundation before they undertake their own "outreach" in their own local geographic area or circle of activity.