

# Why Do We Focus On "Pleasure" as the Goal and the Good, Rather than "Happiness?"

Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2018 at 8:50 AM

Frequently we see an argument that goes something like this:

"Epicurus said that what we seek most is "eudaemonia" (happiness), and that when we have happiness we need nothing else. 'Eudaemonia' is not the same word as 'hedone,' happiness is not the same word as pleasure, and therefore we should describe the goal of life as happiness and not as pleasure."

Here are some thoughts about that from my perspective:

My reading of this issue, which I think is critical, is that it is indeed correct to put the word "Pleasure" in the central role. That's because even though "net pleasure" is probably the best definition of happiness, there's really no need to use another term than pleasure. We are after pleasure, and all our calculations are to maximize pleasure, which generally means "over time." But would it be wrong to grasp some huge pleasure that lasts for a short time, and give up the life after that? Was our departed friend from this group Amrinder wrong to risk his life (and lose it) for the pleasure of flying? Would we be wrong to give up the rest of our life for a friend?

It seems to me that "pleasure" is the right term, and the main reason we're employing other words like happiness is as an aid in describing to other people that it is stupid not to consider time: that it is generally not a good idea to sacrifice long-term net pleasure to some short term mindless activity that does not in the end practically succeed in generating greater net pleasure. But clearly time is not the only factor, and "intensity" is of at least as great importance, so in the end the single word pleasure remains the most accurate summary term - it's just up to us to clearly understand what is meant. So I think we get tripped up by the "time" issue, but in reality that should not trip us up. "Time" is not desirable in itself. According to Epicurus in the letter to Menoeceus, we don't choose the longest life, but the most pleasant life.

Also, my read of "happiness" in actual philosophical discussions is that it tends to be the platform by which snake oil is introduced into the discussion, particularly by Aristotileians, who sneak in their other priorities - which are far different from pleasure - into the same word ("happiness"). These people argue that other things are necessary to happiness besides pleasure, and you have to be wealthy or virtuous or public-minded or obedient to the state or all sorts of other "virtues." But once you let anything into your definition of happiness besides pleasure, the definition gets corrupted not only by that other thing, but far worse: How do you know what that "other thing" is? Their answer to that of course is REASON! And then "reason"

or "logic" or "wisdom" is on its way inevitably to displacing pleasure as the goal. This was explicitly Plato's argument in [Philebus](#).

So yes it is true that Epicurus refers to Eudaemonia in the letter to Menoeceus, but the entire philosophy must be kept in context. Here is where Diogenes of Oinoanda kept it in context:

this topic is why we have quoted Diogenes of Oinoanda so often:

"If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end."

And here is where Torquatus in "On Ends" kept it in context:

"If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure."

In fact, the entire Epicurean discussion in "On Ends" is devoted to this very issue:

"We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict."

Also, to people who are troubled by this issue, I would ask: "What do you perceive happiness to mean in Epicurean terms, if not pleasure?" It really doesn't solve anything to use another language's term, which is all that "eudaemonia" is. This is why I always think it is essential to translate from Greek to English (or whatever language). Leaving it untranslated just hides the ball and solves nothing, because contrary to the Epicurean joking the Greeks did not have a monopoly on clarity in speaking.

As you go through the examples of the use of the words "eudaemonia" and "hedone" and "voluptas" in the Greek and Latin texts. I think the conclusion is clear that, just as Torquatus said, "a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure."

For those who want to dive deeper into this, there are extensive discussions of the issue in Boris [Nikolsky](#)'s "Epicurus On Pleasure" in our files section, in Gosling and Taylor's extensively documented "The Greeks on Pleasure," and of course in general in Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy."

So yes, it is true that naive or first-time readers can be confused by the use of the term "pleasure." Epicurus himself was confronted, as stated in the letter to Menoeceus, by "ignorance, prejudice, and willful misrepresentation." None of which is a good reason to stop talking about correct statements of the goal of life, any more than confusion about "gods" is reason to stop talking about correct statements about the highest forms of life that are possible.

From the beginning over two thousand years ago the enemies of Epicurus have tried to get him to back down in the defense of Pleasure. Epicurus did not back down, Torquatus did not back down, Diogenes of Oinoanda did not back down, and we should not back down either.

Yes we educate, yes we bring people along at a pace that is suitable, but are we ever going to convince everyone? Absolutely not, nor should be set that as our goal.

[VS29](#). "To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many."

Of course it's not necessary to speak in "oracles" and Epicurus did not either. All that is necessary is to speak plainly and clearly without ever backing down from the truth.

Notes:

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### **Post by "Elli" of December 18, 2018 at 8:57 AM**

For the sake of happiness or for the sake of pleasure we choose and even a pain? We choose pain to acquire a greater pleasure. The cup of life has to be full to rim with pleasures. I confused what is the goal ? I say both, but I have to be more precise what is the goal that is a FEELING as the fundamental basis of happiness. Because if someone had a chance to be in an international conference of philosophy, with all those theoreticians, he also would hear the following phrases by a professor of philosophy.

- Professor : Everyone has a different opinion about "the happiness", so you have to examine the definition of the word "happiness" in the basis of Aristotelian philosophy, because if we ask any upstart he would say to us that is happy, but he won't ...

- And an Epicurean responded to him : But with my work I used the data on the happiness by psychologists, and in accordance with the observation of Nature and the human nature that all are agreed with the view of Epicurus.

- Professor : This is not philosophy, this is psychology!

- And the Epicurean responded : there is philosophy i.e. the epicurean that is confirmed by the science and the whole Nature, and it is not just words/theories.... and the conversation with that professor stopped here.

Because that Epicurean did not make CLEAR to the professor what is the GOAL. The tangible real goal and as set to us by Nature.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2018 at 9:26 AM**

Another way of posing the same question might be:

Is "happiness" something other than a "feeling"? I would say "No."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2018 at 12:47 PM**

Here is another way of stating my summary of this problem but it requires background:

As a first background item, Stoics and others do not like the idea of "pleasure" at all - they find it virtuousness, so they deprecate pleasure and extol pain. From such a perspective there is very little in a philosophy of pleasure which they can find to latch onto, and they have to go looking very hard at Epicurean philosophy to find anything with which they can identify.

As a second background item, Epicurus wrote his letter to Menoecus in a context where the prevailing analysis of Pleasure was that expressed by Plato in [Philebus](#). Very few people today have time to read that, but if you were a student of philosophy in Athens you would have known that Plato said pleasure could not be the guide of life because the desire for pleasure is insatiable - can never be satisfied - and therefore something else is more important, and that something else is using wisdom/reason as a regulator to stop overindulgence in pleasure.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/636-why-do-we-focus-on-pleasure-as-the-goal-and-the-good-rather-than-happiness/>

Epicurus answered that objection to his students by showing them that pleasure does have a limit, and that limit is reached when our experience is full of pleasure, all pain has thereby been expelled from our experience. As a corollary of that observation, Epicurus pointed out that since our experience is full of either pleasure or pain, the \*quantity\* of pleasure is exactly equal to the quantity of experience in which there is no pain - so in that quantitative perspective, the amount of pleasure equals the amount of where pain is absent, or in summary terms, "pleasure = absence of pain."

So these two combined set the stage. Epicurus was talking to people who understood his analysis that experience is either pleasure or pain, so the quantity argument was crystal clear to them. But the STOICS and others who dislike pleasure jumped on the equation "pleasure = absence of pain" and they lifted it out of the \*quantity\* context to argue that pleasure IN EVERY RESPECT equals absence of pain. This is **\*\*nonsense\*\***, but they can quote the text out of context and appear to use Epicurus himself in support of their argument.

And so the favorite technique of those who cannot believe, or cannot agree, with Epicurus that pleasure is the meaning of life transmute the argument so that Epicurus is alleged to have said that this term "absence of pain" is the full meaning of life. Again, this is nonsense, but if it relieves them of defending the term "pleasure" allows them to embrace Epicurus, and allows them to say that Epicurus was a proto-Stoic or a proto-Buddhist or whatever kind of ascetic suits their personal preference.

In my view this is why the definition of happiness and of pleasure itself is so controversial, and why so much time is spent arguing it. If by the terms of our definitions we can write "pleasure" out of existence and define both pleasure and happiness as "absence of pain" or some other amorphous ambiguous term, the the thread of Epicurean philosophy ever meaning anything to ordinary people is thoroughly extinguished.