

# An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

Post by "Don" of October 9, 2021 at 10:35 PM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

We cross posted -- much of the answer to your question is in the "animality objection" in post 82 above.

## [Quote from Don](#)

I thought the "All pleasure is good" precluded the ranking of pleasure.

That would be correct if we considered all pleasure is good" to mean "all pleasure is THE highest good" but it is by no means clear (at least to me) that Epicurus was considering "good" here in that absolute sense, rather than in the relative sense in which there are many goods, some better than others. That's the reason for the SUMMUM in the "summum bonum" I think.

Okay, let me finally return to my "Oh, my"...

Pleasure is "THE highest good" not because it is the "Best Bestest Good Out Of All The Other Goods."

It is "The Good" because it is the good thing to which all other possible candidates for "The Good Thing" leads. It is *The Good*, the Tagathon, the Goal, the Telos at the End of every action or desire. It is NOT "good" *relative* to other goods. It is THE GOOD. There are no rivals.

Virtue cannot be The Good because ultimately we act virtuously because it is instrumental to pleasure.

Wisdom cannot be The Good because we act wisely ultimately because it is instrumental to feelings of pleasure.

Philosophy cannot be The Good because we follow a philosophy because it will lead us to pleasure.

EVERYTHING points to pleasure. Pleasure sits at the top of the heap of possible candidates for The Good BECAUSE it is the final destination, The Goal, the Telos, the End. That is why it's the SUMMUM bonum. It is at the *summit* of goods. All paths up the mountain pass virtue, wisdom, etc., along the way and what sits at the end of the path at the top... why do we do the things we do? ... To achieve pleasure! The SUMMUM denotes the top or the summit. It is literally the highest good. It is the good "at the utmost, at farthest." Every path, followed to its end, leads

ultimately to pleasure. Pleasure is literally The End at the end of the path.

This is also an argument against viewing some pleasures being "higher" than others. PLEASURE writ large is the telos, the goal, the end, the highest good. We chase pleasure in all its myriad and varied forms.

Aristotle didn't accept pleasure as The Good because (according to [the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)) "pleasure cannot be our ultimate target, because what counts as pleasant must be judged by some standard other than pleasure itself, namely the judgment of the virtuous person." That's circular reasoning it seems to me. Pleasure can't be the ultimate good because there needs to be a standard of pleasure judged by some virtuous person?? That's one reason why Epicurus said Pleasure IS The Standard for our choices. There is no other "authority" - no virtuous person - judging our actions except does this choice lead to pleasure.

Now, this didn't deter Epicurus from saying, "Yes, all pleasure is good, but that pleasure you're thinking about choosing... Experience has shown that leads ultimately to pain, not the most pleasant life. Okaaaay, you do the drugs all night, drink til dawn if you choose to. BUT you're going to pay a hefty price tomorrow and even more if you keep it up. But I will not argue that you aren't feeling pleasure in the moment. I'll let the Cyrenaics know you'll be knocking at their door."

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

Another way of stating the question is that if he had been consistent, as soon as Epicurus formulated his philosophy he should have retired to his cave and lived a subsistence existence totally apart from the crowd. But he did not -- he lived a life of relative material luxury and devoted much of his time to philosophical controversy. Why - one naturally would ask? And I think the answer has to be in part that he valued the pleasures that he chose to pursue more highly - much more highly - than the pleasures he would have achieved had he retired to the cave on bread and water.

I'm not sure what you're getting at here. Epicurus talked the talk and walked the walk. He aimed to live the most pleasant life. Living an ascetic life in a cave open to the elements, alone, away from friends, on the edge of starvation, would not be pleasant. He knew that obviously. He set up shop right outside the walls of the city on the road to the Academy in relative affluence for the day. It has nothing to do with "higher" or "lower" pleasures. The life he led was the most pleasant for him and he chose that.

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

And I would say that what seems like the obvious answer to me is that he chose the pleasures derived from the life of philosophical study and writing and controversy as much more pleasant to him than the life of "grazing in the grass."

Epicurus chose "the pleasures derived from the life of philosophical study and writing" precisely because he found it pleasurable. He obviously enjoyed teaching, writing diatribes against rival schools, welcoming friends into the Garden. I don't think he weighed living like a cow or a pig AGAINST a life of teaching and writing. He knew what would bring him pleasure and pursued that.