

# Another mainstream article claiming ataraxia is the goal

Post by “Cassius” of September 23, 2022 at 6:29 AM

Here is an example we have discussed before that illustrates the same thing. I have underlined two sentences to stress what I see as the important off-key statements that lead to problems:

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[Achieving Tranquility: Epicurus on Living without Fear](#) Tim O’Keefe, Georgia State University

[Penultimate draft. Final version is forthcoming in The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy, eds. Jacob

Klein and Nathan Powers, Oxford University Press. Please cite that version once it is published.]

1. Introduction: the place of eliminating fear in Epicurean ethics and physics

Eliminating fear is at the center of Epicurean ethics, because of their idiosyncratic doctrines regarding pleasure. The Epicureans are hedonists, maintaining that only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain intrinsically bad. (Cicero Fin. 1.29). They distinguish between bodily and mental pleasures and pains. Bodily pleasures and pains—such as the feelings of eating a bacon cheeseburger, suffering from hunger, or being punched in the face—concern the present state of one’s body. But mental pleasures and pains—such as a thrill of excitement, or a

pang of regret—encompass the past and future too. For this reason, the Epicureans think that mental pleasures and pains are greater than bodily ones. (Cicero Fin. 1.55-57) When people initially think of pleasure, they often have in mind some process of active titillation of the senses or of the mind, such as a yummy sensation of eating a bacon cheeseburger or a thrill of excitement—which the Epicureans call “kinetic” pleasures. But the absence of pain, such as being free of hunger after having eaten the cheeseburger, is not merely a neutral state

between pleasure and pain. Instead, it is itself a kind of pleasure—a “static” pleasure, as opposed to the kinetic pleasures. (Cicero Fin. 1.37-38) Indeed, the Epicureans proclaim that the absence of pain marks the limit of pleasure, and that once this limit is reached, the pleasure one experiences cannot be increased. (KD 3, KD 18) 1

Given this pair of distinctions, the Epicureans maintain that the main constituent of the pleasant life, and hence, of the happy life, is the static mental pleasure of ataraxia, or tranquility—the state of being free from mental disturbance. So while it is accurate to call the Epicureans hedonists, it might be less misleading to say that they are “tranquillists.” Fear is the primary obstacle to achieving tranquility, and so Epicurean ethics centers on eliminating fear.

(It also concerns itself with eliminating other sources of mental disturbance, such as regret and envy.) In fact, it might rightly be said that all of Epicurean philosophy centers on eliminating fear. That is because Epicureanism is ruthlessly consistent in its hedonism, holding that everything we do—including philosophizing—is justified only to the extent that it contributes to a pleasant life.

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My comment:

The thrust of the Okeefe argument is the first underlined sentence: "Eliminating fear is at the center of Epicurean ethics, because of their idiosyncratic doctrines regarding pleasure." I believe this is wrong because I do not believe that Epicurus held "idiosyncratic doctrines regarding pleasure."

Quote from Merriam Webster

Note: "idiosyncratic" at [Merriam Webster](#):

Definition of idiosyncrasy

1a: a peculiarity of constitution or temperament : an individualizing characteristic or quality

b: individual hypersensitiveness (as to a drug or food)

2: characteristic peculiarity (as of temperament)

broadly : ECCENTRICITY

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In this case I believe the meaning of idiosyncratic intended by OKeefe is "Eccentric" for the purpose of conveying that Epicurus did not hold a normal view of pleasure at all, but defined pleasure in an unconventional way that leads to unconventional results. The eccentric and unconventional result allegedly identified by Okeefe is in the second sentence that I underlined:

"Given this pair of distinctions, the Epicureans maintain that the main constituent of the pleasant life, and hence, of the happy life, is the static mental pleasure of ataraxia, or tranquility—the state of being free from mental disturbance."

Okeefe and other similar writers would have us believe that Epicurus held "the main constituent of the pleasant life to be "the state of being free from mental disturbance."

The heart of their argument to that effect are references to the limit of pleasure in the letter to Menoecus and in PD3 and [PD18](#), plus reference to statements such as in Torquatus to the

effect that:

Quote from Cicero's Torquatus

*"For the pleasure which we pursue is not that alone which excites the natural constitution itself by a kind of sweetness, and of which the sensual enjoyment is attended by a kind of agreeableness, but we look upon the greatest pleasure as that which is enjoyed when all pain is removed."*

and

*[38] 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.*

Are these views "eccentric" or "unconventional"? If so what is eccentric and unconventional about them?

My belief is that - rightly understood - there is nothing eccentric or unconventional about these statements at all, and the way to reconcile the terminology to our own conventional understanding is right there in the texts, in statements such as:

*"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 has defined clearly (and this is stated in Diogenes Laertius as well) that there are only two feelings: (1) pleasure and (2) pain. Every one of the myriad experiences that we feel going on in our bodies in our minds from moment to moment and throughout our lives is therefore categorizable as either a pleasurable or a painful experience.

The analysis which is compelled by categorizing every experience as either pleasure or pain is that we can and should evaluate our experiences, both at each moment and throughout our lifetimes, as a "sum" in which we individually assess the "balance" of pleasures offset against pains. Just as we conceptually choose to divide all experiences into either pleasure or pain, we conceptually view our total experience (by which we judge whether we are happy or unhappy) as an individual feeling of assessment about the totality of all our experiences. We offset the pains of life against the pleasures and we ask ourselves "Were the pleasures we obtained worth the pain that it cost us?"

The part of the analysis where Cicero and others exploit the potential confusion is that we may not normally viewing our happiness as a mathematical sum of pleasures offset with pains. However it makes perfect sense to do so because in the Epicurean worldview we understand

that there is no absolute definition of happiness and no supernatural god blessing our lives as happy or unhappy. Just as we are bodily the sum of our atoms and void, we are mentally the sum of our experiences (all of which we have chosen to categorize as either pleasurable or painful) and it makes perfect sense for us to add them all up so we can both feel and think about "Was it worth it?"

And because it makes perfect sense to evaluate our lives (remembering that we have defined the pursuit of pleasure to be the goal) we want to add up our experiences and evaluate them as whole to see how much (if at all) the pleasures of life have predominated over the pains. In doing so, we have to remember the subjectivity of pleasures and pains, which makes it impossible for us to use a Benthamite approach and somehow assign particular units of pleasure and pain to each experience. Everyone evaluates sex vs food vs material luxuries differently, and even in their own single lives evaluates them differently at different periods of time. So we can't suggest a "perfect mix" of experiences as the 'best' pleasures or combinations of pleasures or pains to pursue.

But what we can do is to observe that the "best" way of life would be - conceptually and in general - the life in which pleasures most predominate over pains. And a perfectly reasonable way of expressing that goal conceptually is "a life free from pain" ---- because we know that that means in our analysis framework a life full of pleasures!

Viewed in this way there is nothing idiosyncratic or eccentric or unusual in Epicurus' approach whatsoever. The philosopher who advocates the pursuit of pleasure is saying nothing more than that the best life is that in which pleasures so predominate over pain that pains are reduced to zero. There is no need to infer that the philosophy who valued clarity and stripping away error would have us invert the normal definition of pleasure and accept a paradoxical definition that implies to us the absence of pleasure.

The "main constituent" of the pleasant life is not found in "tranquility" or "freedom from disturbance" but exactly where Epicurus clearly placed it, in the same place that the young of all living things place it before they have been perverted by error - in Pleasure. There are no absolute measurements of which pleasures are greater or lesser than others, and which pains are so great that they outweigh many pleasures. It is up to us to subjectively judge in our own circumstances what combination of mental and bodily feelings provide to us the happiest mix that is available to us. Given this viewpoint you would not expect to find an elaborate description of "absence of pain" or "tranquility" as if it were some exquisite jewel to be savored in some special way. What you would expect to find instead would be an elaborate description of the practical way to offset pains against pleasures with a goal of elevating the pleasures in our subjective analysis to as close to 100% as possible (which means getting pains as close to 0% as possible). And that is exactly what you find in both the letter to Menoecus and, more expansively, in Torquatus:

█ Quote from Cicero's Torquatus

But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided.

But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

In short, once it is seen that there is nothing eccentric whatsoever about Epicurus' reasoning, it becomes easy to see that the weirdness and the error that disconcerts our intuitive understanding of pleasure is not in Epicurus. The error was planted in the twisted interpretations of Cicero and those who follow him who wish to tame and neuter the true thrust of Epicurean philosophy: Pleasure - as the term is normally understood and subjectively evaluated sum of all mental and bodily experiences.