

# Practical Pleasure-Pain Perspectives: How Different is 99% Pleasure From 100% Pleasure?

Post by "Cassius" of October 5, 2023 at 12:06 PM

I'd like to use this as a starting point to ask a new question:

## [Quote from Godfrey](#)

Basically I'm toying with the idea that k/k may not deserve the amount of attention that it gets. My thinking is that k/k is really just a way of describing duration, and we don't have any existing texts from Epicurus to which would give it any more importance.

An existing text that we do have is [PD09](#). I'm currently interpreting it as defining the three components of pleasure as intensity, duration and location. The more I think on it, the more useful these seem to be for working with maximizing one's pleasure. And if I'm interpreting [PD09](#) correctly, which is open to debate, then to my mind it has more relevance than the texts dealing with k/k, as it is directly attributed to Epicurus.

So I'm suggesting that the three components of pleasure as described in [PD09](#) are a more valuable topic of study than katastematic and kinetic pleasure. As far as I can tell, [PD09](#) has been pretty much ignored, possibly due to its confusing wording, while k/k is the subject of endless, and endlessly open-ended, discussion. And I'm wondering if the focus on k/k is more useful to opponents of Epicurus than to practicing Epicureans.

Regardless of whether the topic of k/k pleasure is a blessing or a curse, I would like to put that aside for the moment and address what I think is a more basic question.

It seems to me that we are often not very clear when we are discussing "pleasure" as to whether what we are referring to is (1) any number of individual discrete experiences that occur at the same time (such as my being aware that my tooth is hurting at the same time I am aware that I am pleased to be talking with a friend) or (2) some kind of a "sum" of all experiences lumped together into one statement.

I think that people are often talking about pleasure as if it is (2) when they should first be examining the issue under the framework of (1).

I ask this because I would suggest we evaluate the quote currently at the top of the forum (Torquatus' "whatever is free from pain is in pleasure"), and compare it to a statement most people seem to agree is authentic Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius 22): "The disease in my bladder

and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you."

I find it impossible to interpret this statement in his letter to Idomeneus as anything other than a statement by Epicurus that he is able to walk and chew gum at the same time: he is able to feel pain in one part of his experience (his abdomen) at the same time that he is able to feel pleasure in another part of his experience (his mind). Is this not a statement that what Epicurus is doing is offsetting one against the other that he is both feeling simultaneously?

I do not think that this conflicts with [PD03](#) ("Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.") because he is not saying that either his mind or his abdomen experience both pain and pleasure at the same location at the same time. These are different locations and sources of pain/pleasure - the "wherever" - and the overall common sense context that we can feel numbers of different things simultaneously explains why both can be going on at the same time.

Likewise, Torquatus says: "*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,*" (On Ends Book 1:38) Torquatus further says "*Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains.*" Torquatus continues in the same balancing vein with: *And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.* (On Ends Book 1:62)

Do these passages not establish clearly that the Epicureans are presuming that life is continually a combination of pleasurable feelings and painful feelings, often occurring simultaneously in different parts of a person's full experience, and that through philosophy our goal should be to continually produce a preponderance of pleasure over pain?

Most of us will agree (I believe) that Epicurus would say that having 100% of our experience composed of pleasures would be desirable. Most of us I again believe would agree with that proposition as being a theoretical limit to how good life could be. I doubt many of us would argue that life should be 200% pleasure -- and I doubt that even entertaining that proposition would make any sense at all.

What does make sense is that like Epicurus, sometimes we can find mental pleasures to offset physical pains, and sometimes we can find physical pleasures to offset mental pains, not to mention physical pleasures offsetting physical pains and mental pleasures offsetting mental pains. Is that not our common experience as human beings?

If all that is the case does not "absence of pain" really means "absence of any experiences of pains - meaning discrete experiences of pain?"

And whether we refer to painlessness as aponia or ataraxia or any other word we choose, does not "pure pleasure" or "100% pleasure" simply mean "all my experiences over the time period being considered are pleasurable."

If these propositions are correct, I think they support the conclusion that in referring to "the limit of pleasure" Epicurus was in no way referring to a unique experience that everyone experiences in the same way. Is Epicurus not more likely to be saying that 100% pleasure (which is the same as saying 0% pain) is not different in kind or type from the experience of 99% pleasure, and the difference exists only in the 1% degree of pain that still remains, whatever that pain (or pains) might be?

Is there any reason to think that there is a "big bang" when that last 1% is finally eliminated? Is there any reason to think that looking for a "total elimination of pain" serves as more than a theoretical limit that helps us target how to get from where we are to a better place of even more pleasures and fewer pains? I would say "No." The perfect is not the enemy of the good, and there is nothing magical at all about getting from 99% pleasures to 100% pleasures.

Eliminating that extra 1% is desirable, but by no means is obsessing over the final 1% the exclusive object of Epicurus' advice. Nor is eliminating that final 1% in any way a justification for pursuing a life of asceticism or minimalism. If you yourself judge that the particular combination of 99% experiences that you believe worth pursuing is worth the cost of that 1% of your life encumbered by pains, then why not take what you can get and be satisfied that you have lived a great life even if it had a few irritations?

Just as we should be weighing "pleasure" in terms of duration, location, and intensity, as Godfrey's post (I think rightly) suggests, we should then move to the next step of the evaluation: All sorts of feelings of varying duration, location, and intensity are registering in our lives at any particular moment (or over our lifetime).

The most logical and common sense way of understanding what Epicurus is saying is that in the same way that there's no god in heaven writing a report card and giving us a "pass" or "fail" grade on the sum of our lives, there's also no mystical or difficult-to-understand experience that only he as a Greek intellectual was able to capture in words that the rest of the world finds difficult to comprehend.

Over every time period we can consider, we can personally add up our experiences of pleasure and experiences of pain and talk about which ones predominated. If we wish, we can assign a tag name such as "happy" to describe those periods when pleasures predominates over pains. But we're never doing anything except comparing our pleasurable experiences to our painful experiences and doing our best to increase the predominance of pleasures over pains.

We talk a lot about Epicurus having a "calculus of pleasure" without going much further. I think it would help if we start first with the basic arithmetic and get more familiar with comparing our pleasures to our pains. If we see pleasures and pains as discrete, as Epicurus weighed them against each other on his last day, I think we then see a very practical and easy-to-understand philosophy. The natural goal is to maximize the predominance of pleasures over pains. No one but us can ultimately judge whether we have done that well because no one else feels what we feel. And as our lives near their ends, no one's opinion about how we spent our lives matters but our own, and we have to be prepared to justify to ourselves - and not to gods or to anyone

else - that we have lived well.