

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2023 at 10:24 AM

Here's a passage that is frequently troublesome and is guaranteed to bring out the inner Stoic / Ascetic / Buddhist in anyone who does not consider all non-painful experiences to be pleasurable.

[Quote from Epicurus Letter to Menoeceus \[128\]](#)

The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body. *For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure."

I would say rather than a call to asceticism, the better interpretation of this passage is that once we have filled our experience with pleasures we have no further need for additional pleasures because all pain has been eliminated. That does not mean that we no longer have need for the pleasures which we accumulated in order to fill our experience, it simply means that we need no further additional pleasures beyond those which we already have.

Those who suggest that we have no need of pleasure after our life is full of pleasures are saying something similar to that we have no need of life after our life is full of life. That would be a perverse reading of the passage and writes the word "pleasure" completely out of Epicurean philosophy.

When you recognize all experience that is not painful is pleasurable, such an interpretation becomes impossible. Painlessness is then seen, not as a particular type of pleasure that replaces pleasure, but as a life full of pleasures from which pains have been eliminated. Painlessness then no longer swallows up the category of pleasure, but becomes simply the recognition that filling your experience up to 100% pleasure is all that is possible. And "disturbance" is simply one way of looking at the pains (or category of pains) that need to be minimized or eliminated in order to reach as close to 100% pleasure as you can. You can't reach the desired goal of 100% pleasure if you have mental disturbances that amount to pains.

Painlessness seen as 100% pleasure (the terms are interchangeable) becomes the objective at all times in the same way that the objective of straining the wine to remove impurities is to produce the best quality wine. At the end of the straining process we do not discard the wine, we experience it no matter how many fine impurities might be remaining. The purpose of the exercise is to experience the wine -- in no way are you straining the wine in order to discard it and then drink water!