

What Did Epicurus Include in "Pleasure?"

Post by "Cassius" of March 31, 2019 at 4:10 PM

To Understand How Epicurus Viewed "Pleasure" -

Don't Narrow Your Definition Of Pleasure:

Simple Pleasures, "Absence of Pain"

But W I D E N it:

Simple Pleasures, "Absence of Pain," Sex, Food, Music, Complex Pleasures, Joy, Delight
Everything Mentally/Emotionally Or Physically Pleasurable

"Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good..."

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus

"No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves." *Epicurus Principal Doctrine 8*



Poster1 - How does this reconcile the natural/necessary categories that are traditionally ascribed to Epicurus?

IV - The categories don't restrict the pleasures. They tell us whether we should choose to indulge in the pleasure or not, and how often.

Poster 2 - Yes but can't we also be happy with simple pleasures? For example I'd love to be driving a ferarri but i drive a hybrid so i am happy enough that i'm saving a little gas. I guess I don't understand if he's teaching that pleasures include pain that is greater than the pleasure?

Cassius: That is exactly the point Bryan. You don't need a Ferrari, but do you really even "need" the hybrid, which is something wonderful of modern technology but would appear hopelessly complex to anyone more than a few decades ago? The Amish say that they get along quite well even today with horses and buggy's. The point is that choices are not absolute, but are relative to the individual person's circumstances. There is no absolute definition of "simple" vs "complex" and if you begin to think that there is, then you begin to fall into the error of other schools which hold that things are good and bad in themselves, made that way by gods of by ideal forms.

There are no such ideal forms or supernatural gods. There is only you, and the options open to you, and the question of what will happen to you when you choose from among available options.

It's not the point of these exercises to create a list of what constitutes Natural or necessary, and you don't see in the surviving epicurean literature any such lists, except in the extremely broad form we are discussing here. If you have the capacity to spend 24/7 on a riverside under a tree in the spring talking with your friends, then indeed that is the choice you should make, and that in fact might be akin to how "the gods" spend their time. But such a choice is not open to many of us (I would say "any" of us) so you have to keep your mind geared to the *practical* -- which is choosing among the options with an eye toward what the eventual total outcome will be for your life.

Yes simple is frequently the best choice, but it is NEVER the best choice "because it is simple" -- it is the best choice (when it is) because it leads to the practical result of the most pleasure over the least pain with your entire life in view.

Poster 2 - What if an action entails no disturbance to the performer of that action but to some other being? Said action could still entail no disturbance to the performer even in the case of the performer having reasons to believe that the action could possibly harm others. Is the pleasure produced by the action still not bad in itself in that case?

Cassius: No pleasure is ever "bad in itself" -- Epicurus states that flatly - because "pleasure feels good" which is what makes it pleasure. There is no outside or inside standard (gods, ideal forms, or Aristotelian "essences") which operate to make a thing bad in itself.

The common question of how to relate to others is not an exception to that rule -- there are no exceptions to reality.

The issue of the effects of our dealings with others is answered the same way. What will happen if I choose one course vs. another.

We might want to think that "people are special" and "there's a spark of the divine in everyone" and "Jesus loves ALL the little children of the world" but those things are fictional and simply not true.

The question of "Don't you need religion or XYZ in order to have a happy society is addressed by Diogenes of Oionanda (Martin Ferguson Smith translation):

"Fr. 20

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before."

Poster 1: Can we conclude, then, that the pleasant life will look very similar for most people?

In other words, barring extreme outliers, cannot we conclude that in most circumstances avoiding junk food, promiscuous sex, and reckless spending habits (for examples) will lead to the most pleasant life?

I too would resist the urge to make a finite and definitive list of do's and don'ts but aren't some things just by the way nature is 'bad' insofar as they are almost guaranteed to bring us pain?

Cassius Amicus: Bottom line in my view the issue is that the circumstances of the group of people you are looking at will determine how similarly they make decisions. Eskimos in Alaska in 1930 will have different answers to what is simple and what is extravagant than New Yorkers in 2019 and their lives will look very dissimilar.

But yes, there are definitely characteristics that cut across time and place -- things that intoxicate us (romantic love) are going to be dangerous for everyone; walking on the edge of cliffs is going to be dangerous for everyone. But the 'by way of nature' you're talking about are things that arise from the nature of the human beings involved, and the way their bodies and minds operate, not "by way of gods telling us, or by way of ideal forms telling us how to live" and that's really the big issue.

As Epicurus says in [PD10](#), we might consider the choices of a person to be monstrous, but if in fact those choices produced for the person a happy life, we would have no grounds for condemning those choices as "objectively" wrong.

10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad.