

The Use of Negation in Epicurean Philosophy Concepts

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2025 at 6:33 PM

I think Rolfe is right in picking out any reference to a "neutral state" as being something that's not good Epicurean terminology. The references are pretty clear that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, and there's no third or neutral condition outside these two. For example:

Quote

1. **Diogenes Laertius X-34** : *"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."*
2. **On Ends Book One, 30** : *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*
3. **On Ends Book One, 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."*
4. **On Ends Book One, 39** : *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure."*

As to "with **highest degree of pleasure** coming from a favorite kinetic pleasure" I think this involves the very good question of switching contexts away from the generalizations, like the highest quantity of pleasure is 100% / 0% pain as in [PD03](#), as well as in these cites (some repetition here)

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3. **On Ends Book One, 56** : *By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain. [57] But as we are elated by the blessings to which we look forward, so we delight in those which we call to memory. Fools however are tormented by the recollection of misfortunes; wise men rejoice in keeping fresh the thankful recollection of their past blessings. Now it is in the power of our wills to bury our adversity in almost unbroken forgetfulness, and to agreeably and sweetly remind ourselves of our prosperity. But when we look with penetration and concentration of thought upon things that*

are past, then, if those things are bad, grief usually ensues, if good, joy.

... to switching to the context of whether it is possible to point to particular people at particular times experiencing particular things and say "There, that's an example of what I am talking about!"

I think that's where Patrikos would be correct in pointing to a particular example of a person experiencing some favorite kinetic pleasure without any feeling of mental or bodily pain at the same time. Here we can look back at Torquatus saying repeatedly to Cicero that if you're not experiencing pain then you're experiencing pleasure, and in fact if you represent to me that you are not experiencing any mental or physical pain at all, then what you're telling me is that you're experiencing 100% pleasure, and that's as much pleasure as anyone can experience.

As stated in [PD09](#) pleasures vary in intensity, duration, and parts of the body affected (including the mind) so all experiences of 100% pleasure are not the same for each person, except and only in the respect that if they are 100% for that person then they can't be any better - it's impossible to go past 100%.

I think the main confusion is coming in because people want to compare the experiences of different people when they are "feeling no pain" and they want to say that the particular experiences - though likely involving very different activities - are exactly the same in every respect. As if everyone experiencing 100% pleasure is in some kind of state of euphoria at the right hand of god or something.

It seems to me that that confusion arises from false ideas taught by religion, and that if you start at the beginning of Epicurean philosophy about the nature of the universe, the absence of supernatural gods, the falsity of absolute standards of virtue, and the knowledge that pleasure and pain are feelings given by nature and not concepts or particulars (those are created in our minds) then this problem doesn't trip you up.

When you recognize that the universe is not "designed" and that the atoms and void work together infinite ways over eternal time, and that nature never creates only a single thing of a kind, then you don't even have the expectation that everyone's experiences, pleasurable or painful, are going to be the same.

So Patrikos, who is older like me, due to our age can look upon some experiences as the best we could even hope for, while Rolfe who I understand is much younger, can look aghast at the things that might be 100% pleasing to old guys, and yet there is no philosophical problem. That's why *"he who counsels the young man to live well, but the old man to make a good end, is foolish, not merely because of the desirability of life, but also because it is the same training which teaches to live well and to die well."*

I think it's really good to talk about this because it's a huge stumbling block to people seeing how practical Epicurean philosophy is for everyone. It's particularly a problem for those who want to see Epicurean philosophy grow because our current demographics probably skew toward the nursing home set. 😊 There's no reason at all that that has to be the case, and if the ancient world had understood Epicurus that way the philosophy would never have been as successful as it was. As Torquatus said we should be ashamed that we did not learn as early as when we were children what Epicurus was teaching. Epicurean philosophy is at least as appropriate for young energetic and active people as it is for those who are slowing down, and it's not telling everyone to slow down. A lot of us need to stop procrastinating on what's really valuable to us in life and speed up!

There's nothing wrong or right intrinsically with wanting "rest," and there's nothing wrong intrinsically with wanting to "seize the day." The choice is a matter of considering your personal circumstances and recognizing that there's no god or ideal form to answer your question, and the best you or anyone can do is as widely and intelligently as possible pursue as much pleasure as you can and avoid as much pain as you can. But we're not just just talking immediate physical stimulation or giggles and jokes, we talking about how we evaluate the fact that we have only a short time to live and how we judge the total results of our actions in all their consequences.