

Is All Desire Painful? How Would Epicurus Answer?

Post by "Joshua" of May 7, 2025 at 11:51 PM

Note: I started to write up a separate thread, but then noticed Cassius created this one. So I'm just copying over what I wrote there.

In light of a [recent thread](#) on the categories of desire, and another recent conversation on the topic of *this* thread, I wanted to add some clarity to why I answer the title question affirmatively; yes, I am provisionally of the opinion that desire is a kind of pain. As I said in a recent conversation, this is a consistent opinion, though not a strong one. I really am quite uncertain about this.

Desire is a conscious or unconscious feeling in the mind of wanting something; a preference to *have* where I *have not*, or to *have not* where I *have*.¹ Because a.) desire is a feeling, and because b.) "the feelings are two, pleasure and pain", desire is either;

1. Always pleasureable
2. Sometimes pleasureable and sometimes painful, or
3. Always painful.

The first proposition strikes me as facially absurd, but if some one wishes to defend it I'll hear them out. The main theater of dispute is between the second and third propositions. Before I begin, I'll note something that will quickly become obvious - that this argument, which is ultimately about feelings, *pathe*, is also an argument about words and definition, and about how language is used and how it should be used.

Take, for example, the phrasing of the thread title; Is Desire a *Kind* of Pain? I argue that it is. But it could be said that in defending that precise construction I am using language in a way that is self-serving. This can be seen in my response to the following deductive argument:

- P1. There is nothing other than pain that is always painful, and there is nothing other than pleasure that is always pleasureable.
- P2. Desire is by definition something other than pain, and also something other than pleasure.
- C. Desire, then, is neither always painful, nor always pleasureable.

And now my response, in which I categorize desire differently:

- P1. The feeling of pain is always painful.
- P2. The feeling of pain is differentiable. Just as we speak of mental pain vs bodily pain, it is possible to speak with even greater precision of the kinds of mental pain, and the kinds

of bodily pain.

- P3. Each kind of pain is always painful when it is present.
- P4. Desire is a kind of mental pain.
- C. Desire is always painful when it is present.

You see the importance of language. Now, here are my immediate responses to some other objections:

- Isn't my desire for the continuation of something good that I already have pleasureable?

No. The current enjoyment is pleasureable, and the feeling of security that comes with certainty of (if that were possible), or confidence in, future enjoyment is also pleasureable. Future pleasures are not pleasant until you feel them. Future pains are not painful until you feel them. Let's explore this further with the next objection:

- If it's Christmas Eve and presents are expected Christmas morning, isn't it pleasureable to anticipate those presents?

Perhaps, but anticipating is not the same as desiring. I can anticipate a slap to the face without ever desiring one. It is possible to experience both feelings at once, or, if not, then in quick succession. But the desire, when and if it is felt, is felt as a kind of pain.

Note that I have said nothing about the intensity of that pain. It may be the slightest prick, or it might be much greater.

If one does experience the desire for their Christmas presents on Christmas Eve, the desire is felt in that moment.

I'll stop there for now. Again, I don't feel nearly as strongly about this as I might seem to let on, and I think I could be easily persuaded to a different opinion. Epicurus himself refers to "desires that are not accompanied by pain when they go unfulfilled" in the Principle Doctrines. If he's right, I'm probably wrong.

1 I suppose I'm drawing a distinction between desires, which are mental, and fundamental biological urges, which are physical, and which even insects respond to. Do tapeworms have desires? I would think not...