

Confusion: "The feelings are only two"

Post by "Don" of May 26, 2025 at 11:16 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

When I'm in a "neutral state" - not sick, injured, etc. - and I focus on my body's senses, I pretty much always notice some kind of ache, tenseness, stomach pain, itchiness, or some other uncomfortable feeling that I'm generally able to ignore when I'm not not fixating on it.

That's simply because you're a mortal being in a material world. I have come to the conviction, using Epicurus's philosophy as jumping off point, that *there is no neutral state*. If you are alive, you're feeling, sensing sensations both within and around your body and mind. Even without the findings of modern neuroscience, I have no problem thinking of Epicurus thinking through this and coming up to a similar conclusion:

- living = reacting to sensations
- we are always experiencing our internal and external stimuli (note: Epicurus wouldn't use these words but I have no problem thinking of him thinking parallel thoughts)
- humans can experience sensations either positively (pleasure) or negatively (pain).
- There can be no "neutral" state; that would mean we aren't feeling anything, aren't experiencing anything. We are ALWAYS feeling/experiencing pleasure OR pain. We have no choice BUT to *experience* as long as we are living.

It's important to remember that *pathe/pathos* in ancient Greek most fundamentally means "what one has experienced." Epicurus took the bold step to say there are ONLY two ways to experience the world, either as pleasure or as pain. EVERYTHING we experience, internally or externally, is either painful or pleasurable. And he encompassed the totality of human experience within those two feelings.

Now there are gradations and types of pain and of pleasure: joy, grief, anger, ecstasy, boredom, sleepiness, elation, contentment, happiness, satisfaction, rage, love, disgust, and on and on. But *everything* - all of those - fall into either pleasure or pain.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Your mind should never be in neutral - it always has the capacity to generate positive feelings which are (or should be) more significant to us than those aches and pains you are speaking about.

I would disagree with [Cassius](#) 's wording. Your mind *can never be* in neutral. Your mind doesn't "generate" positive feelings, it experiences them before you can think about generating.

Epicurus' pain wasn't eliminated by his thoughts of his conversations with friends on his last day. He continued to feel his diseased, inflamed kidneys as searing pain. His memories allowed him to "hold his ground against" the pain as if he was drawing up his troops against the pain: ἀντιπαρετάττετο. Those memories gave him pleasure *in the midst of his mortal pain*, not in spite of the pain. He could be happy *with his life*, reliving those pleasant memories, in the midst of his pain.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

This is perhaps why I've been finding it difficult to understand and reconcile the idea that pleasure is the default state.

I don't know if "default state" is the right way of thinking about this. There is no "default" setting I don't think. The pleasure of the mind and body working well, being healthy, and having all your parts working in harmony is pleasure. BUT There is *no guarantee* in life that the mind and body are going to work well, that you'll be health, and that your various parts will be in harmony. You have to work at it. You can't set it to a default and just let it run. If you have that, you have everything needed to experience other pleasures. I would rather think of "a body without pain, and an untroubled mind" being the ground from which other pleasures can be more readily experienced. Granted, if we have that, it can sink into the background if we don't appreciate it... and if we neglect our body and mind, it can fall into pain, trouble, etc. There is no guaranteed default.