

# A Discussion On Pleasure and the Zero State

Post by "Cassius" of June 18, 2019 at 6:39 AM

Gaius:

Thank you for the detailed answer. I did not expect the issue to be so complex.

So can we summarize it as "positive pleasure" beyond the zero state of absence of pain is the simple joy of experiencing life? E.g. a dinner with friends, watching a sunset, a pleasant conversation, celebrating Christmas/Saturnalia etc.?

Since existence requires the fulfillment of simple desires, eating drinking etc., their satisfaction is already pleasureable. So in absence of pain it is a constant feeling of joy just to live. Is this the positive pleasure Epicurus aims for?

If I am not mistaken, the Cyrenaics, the real hedonists, had a different view. They agreed with Epicurus about pleasure being the highest good, but they wanted to maximize any kind of bodily pleasures, and they believed that there was no limit to possible pleasure.

Cassius Amicus:

First addressing Gaius, as I see it this suggestion ("So in absence of pain it is a constant feeling of joy just to live), which I think is fairly common to make as the definition of katastemic pleasure, does not equate with "the positive pleasure Epicurus aims for."

Everyone who reads DL will see clearly stated that - even assuming that Epicurus himself addressed the distinction - Epicurus endorsed BOTH pleasures "of rest" and "of activity."

It would be necessary to repeat the entire chapter of Gosling & Taylor's analysis to explain in full, but their conclusion I think is the correct one: " For if we are right, Epicurus was not advocating the pursuit of some passionless state which could only be called one of pleasure in order to defend a paradox. Rather he was advocating a life where pain is excluded and we are left with familiar physical pleasures. The resultant life may be simple, but it is straightforwardly pleasant."

There is no reason in my mind to exclude from "familiar physical pleasures" the normal definitions of joy and delight as the Epicurean goal. And in fact the quote about the feeling that is experienced at the relief from impending disaster, which almost certainly is intense, leans in that direction.

Rather than the focus on simplicity which does or at least can lead to asceticism, in my view the thrust of Epicurean teaching is contained in the hedonic calculus itself - the goal is pleasure as we normally understand it, to the greatest extent possible within natural bounds as a

human, but with every decision in life weighed by the question of whether it will produce greater net happiness or not.

It would not be consistent in an atomistic universe to have a single type of pleasure which is in itself better than all the rest. People have different preferences and find their pleasures in many different activities. What would be consistent across the whole board would be to look at them as being united in being humans of definite, and not unlimited, lifespan.

Looking at total lifespan of the individual as the ultimate measure of life, then at the end of that person's life we can ask "How much mental and bodily pleasure, and how much pain, did that person experience over his lifetime? Given that the goal of life is pleasure, that means that the answer is formulated as given by Cicero: The most desired life is one which is "crammed full of pleasures" and accompanied by the least pain.

That this is best viewed as the individual feeling of the person in assessing his own experience of pleasure and pain is indicated by the saying in the letter to Menoecus that what we are after is not the longest life, but the happiest. It seems to me that in the most general terms all this adds up to a calculation of net pleasure that does not apply to the moment, but to the lifetime of the individual, the only person whose feeling and judgment matters in assessing his or her life.

Maybe the last point to include is that you are right as far as I can tell that Epicurus held mental pleasures to be as important, and regularly more intense, than "bodily" pleasures, and for that reason his advice as to the calculation including both bodily and mental (clearly stated in *On Ends*) is more sweeping. But out of respect to the Cyrenians this distinction seems so obvious that it is difficult to believe that they really held the "bodily pleasures of the moment" position which is attributed to them. They probably had some other position on that in my view, and the comment by DL distinguishing them from Epicurus on this might be an artifact of some other perspective, as [Nikolsky](#) argues about the katastematic issue in his article "Epicurus on Pleasure."

(By the way that article is in the files section here, along with the Wentham article on pleasure being an \*experience\* and they are both very good articles. The Gosling & Taylor book has the most detailed analysis but that requires a library.)