

A Discussion On Pleasure and the Zero State

Post by "Cassius" of June 26, 2019 at 8:17 AM

GFL: I am quite surprised about the statement that pain and pleasure are subjective. I understand that they are qualia, i.e their nature cannot be communicated, but they have to be experienced in order to be understood. It is one of the three faculties that we have as guidance to truth. Fire is objectively painful for everybody, just as the sweetness of sugar is pleasant to everybody.

Subjectiveness of pain and pleasure would make interactions with other people extremely difficult, if not impossible. It would mean I could torture others and then claim that it was not possible for me to know, whether it was painful or pleasurable to them. Objectiveness of pain and pleasure is given by the common physiological nature that we share as human beings.

Cassius Amicus Perhaps "contextual" would be a better word, and I bet Elayne can do better here than I will, but this is what I think is the point of the word "subjective":

Fire is not **always** painful - it warms us in winter, and in certain conditions fire applied to a part of the body for a short period may be the best remedy for a particular urgent problem, such as cauterizing a wound, and even be immediately pleasurable in ending some intense bodily pain.

Even the sweetness of sugar can become sickening after eating too much of something that is sweet in a short period of time.

To me this relates to the physics as explained by Lucretius in referring to the properties of elements and the qualities of the bodies that come together from the combination of elements. There are ranges of possibilities, and not only single results. That is as is referenced in book one of Lucretius:

"Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror *****to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark."*****

What we are talking about are natural limits and bounds that have within them in many cases wide ranges of different possibilities, and that applies to things that are painful and things that are pleasurable. They are innumerable, but within limits.

Pleasure is by definition always pleasurable, and pain is by definition always painful, but what precise conditions will cause a particular individual to feel pain, or pleasure, does not always

follow the same pattern. Events that cause pleasure and pain are frequently subjective or contextual according to the particular makeup and context of the individual. In many cases it is only the resulting pleasure and pain that we perceive as "objective" to us, rather than something in the nature of the event that *always* produces the same result. (I should perhaps say **all** cases but for this discussion I will stay with **many**.)

This is just in the same way that "virtue" is contextual rather than absolute, a point in Epicurus that is equally clear from sayings such as [PD10](#):

"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."

Cassius Amicus "Subjectiveness of pain and pleasure would make interactions with other people extremely difficult, if not impossible. " << And indeed, our different preferences in pleasure and pain DO make interactions with **some** other people "extremely difficult if not impossible." What you and I find pleasing as a way of life, Gaius Florius, I wager would make life very difficult for us were we to attempt to live the rest of our lives in downtown Mecca. Which differences in viewpoint on what we find pleasurable and painful is why some people get along very well with others, and some are constantly at war.

39. The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.

40. Those who possess the power to defend themselves against threats by their neighbors, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee of security, live the most pleasant life with one another....

1

GFL: Cassius Amicus Do people really feel different things pleasurable, or do they not rather make wrong judgements? Is asceticism the result of people finding pleasure in hardship or not rather the delusional hope for an imaginary reward?

EC - GFL:, to say someone made a "wrong" judgment about pain or pleasure is to assert you have an absolute standard, which does not exist.

Because we are in the same species, there are certainly a great many events which will stimulate pain for most typical humans, or pleasure. It would be surprising if that were not so. This is more likely the case with events likely to cause severe tissue damage or death, given

the role of pain as a warning signal.

But even for tissue damaging events, the only objective measure would be of damage or no damage. Not pain or no pain, which is subjective. If someone has no nerve function to respond to a burn, they are not making a wrong judgment when they report no pain-- the lack of pain is part of the diagnosis and is accurate. If someone feels phantom limb pain, the pain is real, even though the initial stimulus is gone.

For me, enjoying anticipatory hunger seems to accurately reflect that food is coming... but if someone else feels that as pain, I won't tell them they are wrong!

For other events, there can be wide variation. For instance, the taste of cilantro can be like soap for a significant portion of the population, due to genetic variation. Most of them don't like cilantro. Can you say which taste is a "wrong judgment"? I can't.

I enjoy classical music and opera-- I know people who act like they are being tortured by opera ?! Are they incorrect about their preferences in music? How would you ascertain that?

Cassius Amicus Gaius I am thinking that it is not quite exactly the right word to talk about a "judgment" of what is pleasurable. I am thinking that Epicurus stressed that pleasure is a "feeling" and that this section of On Ends was intended to address not only that pleasure is good, but what pleasure itself really is:

"Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"

GFL: Judgment is only required for actions, not for the distinction of pain and pleasure, which is simply a premise for our judgment.

I think we can keep physiological disorders out of the issue and focus on the statistical norm.

For non-discapacitated people the feeling of pain and pleasure is the same, yet their decisions differ.

Some people may prefer an unpleasant (bitter) taste, because it brings them back past memories, but the taste is still objectively bitter, i.e. unpleasant.

If we deny that pleasure and pain is the same for all, how can there even be a disagreement between Epicureans and Stoics? One could just say that Stoics get their pleasure from virtue.

Fact is, they do not. They make a wrong judgement about the reward for their arbitrary virtue.

It would be the same for a masochist that may claim that he gets pleasure from being flogged. He does not. He feels pain like anybody else. But he makes a wrong judgment and hopes for imaginary recognition and attention from the sadist.

Without objective standards for pleasure and pain, we would not need different philosophies, because everybody could just claim that it is his way to find pleasure.

Cassius Amicus "One could just say that Stoics get their pleasure from virtue." Yes I would say that some Stoics allege that they do get pleasure from virtue, and I would admit that some do get pleasure from virtue. I think the issue here is that we are not saying that abstractions cannot be pleasurable. Of course they can. The thought of living forever singing songs to God is pleasurable, certainly, at least for a time. And Epicurus said that mental pleasures can be and often are more intense than physical ones.

I think the point that needs clarification is the issue stated in On Ends, which is what facts of reality truly produce the happiest life - in other words, how to "rationally" pursue pleasure: "But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure."

Epicurus did not condemn religion because of the pleasure it produced in the priests, at least in the short term, for them. And Epicurus made very clear that if the legends of the gods IN FACT produced the happiest life, then he would endorse it, just as he would endorse any depraved lifestyle that in fact produces happiness.

The truth is that religion does not produce the happiest life, because it is false, and those who believe in it are in the far greater number of cases vastly disappointed. Do some live their entire lives happily in a myth? Yes, and if so, more power to them, would be Epicurus' response. But living in a mirage is not reasonably calculated to lead to the happiest living for most people.

"Without objective standards for pleasure and pain, we would not need different philosophies, because everybody could just claim that it is his way to find pleasure."

But the point is not that our "objective standards" produce happy living. Nature does not care about our "objective standards." Nature created individual humans with particular concepts and their own capacities and faculties. Yes those faculties are not random, and yes they generally fall within a range of limits. But that range can be very wide, as wide as Islam is from Harvard-style atheist hedonism, and there is no "objective" way to resolve the differences of opinions between groups who are so divergent.

Unless you want to talk about military force or similar methods of genocide, because those are certainly capable of producing "objective" results. I am of course not suggesting that those are viable options, but the cliché about "no accounting for tastes" is a huge understatement. What I am saying is that the issue cannot be reduced to a taste-test to measure that 98% of people enjoy Coca-Cola original formula. Yes that kind of testing in raw bodily data is possible. But pleasure is a faculty that embraces both bodily and mental activities, and the range of mental activities that we find pleasurable or painful is so broad as to be practically limitless.

Elayne Coulter I am astonished that anyone could argue that differences in pain and pleasure are matters of judgment rather than feeling! They are matters of neurotransmitters. If someone gets a burst of serotonin, oxytocin, and/or endorphins from an experience, they are experiencing pleasure, a feeling, not a thought.

Perhaps more examples will help?

Some people think The Three Stooges are funny-- they laugh spontaneously at slapstick comedy. In the pleasure category. Others get an instant sense of annoyance-- even to the point it would be torture to force them to watch. Pain. Yes, thoughts are involved, but the resulting pain and pleasure are feelings, and they happen within the person-- they are not properties of the Stooges.

Salt is an interesting one-- if a person has been sweating and is in need of salt, they crave more salt on their food and will feel pleasure eating it-- the same person would find that food too salty-- unpleasant, mild pain-- on another day. This is one of the ways we have evolved to intuitively regulate our salt balance, through pain and pleasure under different circumstances. This is for a normal person, not any sort of disorder.

I know people who love hot peppers-- it causes release of pleasurable endorphins. Yes, they feel it as hot, but they also feel pleasure. For me, it's hot and painful, no pleasure. The feeling is the response, not the stimulus.

Our evolved biological resemblances lead to many pain and pleasure experiences in agreement.

The difference in philosophy is about the role of pleasures and their contribution to a happy life. Although we can make some generalizations, due to shared genes, about actions that will cause pleasure or pain for most of us, that's not the most important part of EP, in my opinion. The important part is understanding that happiness consists of pleasures, and so to be happy, one ought to pay attention to what decisions bring about the most net pleasure. It's great to

learn from the reactions most humans have-- but it's also critical to observe one's own, individual preferences. Otherwise you might mistakenly choose or avoid slapstick, salty food, or hot pepper based on what brings other people pleasure.

Cassius Amicus This from Elayne is an example of the point being made about Stoicism or any other emotional / intellectual experience. And it isn't even necessary to see or here them at the moment - simply recalling the three stooges to mind can be pleasurable or painful:

"Some people think The Three Stooges are funny-- they laugh spontaneously at slapstick comedy. In the pleasure category. Others get an instant sense of annoyance-- even to the point it would be torture to force them to watch. Pain. Yes, thoughts are involved, but the resulting pain and pleasure are feelings, and they happen within the person-- they are not properties of the Stooges."

It is a huge mistake to limit the range of pleasure to food, air, etc.

GFL: First I would like to thank everybody for this pleasant discussion with so many well-thought arguments. This is something rather unusual these days on Facebook.

Elayne brought up some complex examples, like our different reaction to the same stimulus (pepper). I have not enough data to give an answer to this and I think the issue is still subject to scientific research. I recently read a study about why some people prefer bitter tastes like coffee and others do not.

However I would like to clarify a less complex issue, where I think I was misunderstood. Pleasure and pain is not subject to judgment, it is data. We have a sense that tells us exactly if and how much painful/pleasant an experience is. Judgment is necessary for our actions. And here we can be wrong, because we might not correctly identify the cause of our pleasure.

I have three simple examples:

1. A person might decide to get drunk, because he had a lot of fun last weekend while being drunk. He went to a club, met nice people and enjoyed the evening. However when he tries to repeat the pleasant experience, he insults other people while being drunk, gets into a quarrel with his friend, falls from the stairs on his way back home and has a hangover next morning - all in all a very unpleasant experience.

The reason for it is the wrong judgment. Because it was not the state of ebriety that caused his pleasure, but other circumstances that coincided with it. The wrong judgment of equating ebriety with pleasure caused the wrong decision to get drunk and a lot of unpleasant events.

2. A monk may think that asceticism and deprivation of all bodily pleasures will give him happiness in the afterlife. So he leads a miserable life in the monastery that he does not enjoy at all. He gets bitter and angry but imagines that after death he will be rewarded in a way that overcompensates his suffering. The more he suffers, the closer he thinks he will get to paradise, which at least sporadically gives him a positive feeling. If we follow Epicurus'

teachings there is no existence after death. So all his sacrifices were in vain and the overall balance of happiness in his life was negative. Again a wrong judgment caused more pain than pleasure.

3. The last example is the wide-spread belief that money equals happiness. Some people may commit crimes or betray their friends with the goal to obtain money and reach a point in life, when they have so much money that they will be completely happy. Statistical data however shows that the opposite is true. Wealth does not lead to happiness and the likelihood of suicide is much higher among wealthy people as compared to people around the poverty level. Again a wrong judgment about what causes happiness led to a wrong decision.

All these three people would have confirmed to you that this is their personal way to find happiness and that they know better than anybody else, what gives them happiness. But objectively they were wrong. It did not give them happiness; they misidentified what actually gives pleasure to them. This is where the wrong judgment comes in.

EC -- GFL:, yes! That is why using our actual feelings of pain and pleasure, not reasoning based on misinformation, is so important! These people are trying to define happiness as something other than pleasure, and that will definitely lead a person away from happiness.

I will just say for alcohol, it isn't just the circumstances that cause the pleasure or pain-- it's a combination of the chemical effects, the dose, the person's particular physiology/enzyme variants and capacity, plus the circumstances-- and this is a situation that calls for assessing net effects. Because some actions do cause immediate, true pleasure, but the net effects are painful. Meaning, there doesn't have to be misattribution of the source of pleasure for the overall effects to be unpleasant and therefore advised against.

Maybe a good example would be a person having intense enjoyment of the taste of a certain food... but this food contributes to their type 2 diabetes being poorly controlled. Later they lose their vision and have their feet amputated because they didn't consider the net effects. Whereas another person with no predisposition to diabetes can eat the same delicious food and live to 100 with no trouble. In this case, both had immediate pleasure but only one had net pain.

Cassius Amicus Probably even the diabetic example shows how hard it is to make the decision for someone else. Who gets to decide the "net pleasure" calculation - if having a foot amputated a month before death is worth a lifetime of eating the food that someone really enjoys? I don't know myself what my answer would be to that. No doubt it would depend on all sorts of hard-to-predict individual variables about how long one thinks one would live, etc. If I were a kamikaze pilot, or both my parents had died at age 50 for 5 generations from heart attacks unrelated to diabetes, I might not give as much thought to the effect of diabetes at age 80.

This is no detraction from Epicurus though. Just because it's difficult to calculate, or even to know how to calculate, the net final effects of a particular decision, that doesn't mean that we should fall back to decision-making based on false gods or false idealism. Each of us has to make our own estimate of the effects of our actions, because there is no god or no absolute standard making the decision for us. And in particular, no god looks to reward us in an afterlife for intentionally under-achieving in our pursuit of pleasure.

EC - Cassius, I agree! It would depend on that person's own degree of pleasure and pain-- it's useful to consider the big picture when making those decisions, but ultimately only the person deciding can know which path has more pleasure!

GFL: I am strongly convinced that to all problems there is only one logically correct answer and it can be objectively established. The risk and possible benefit of a lifestyle choice can be precisely calculated. It is called "expected utility rule" and a way to make rational decisions under uncertainty. You can for example take statistical data about diabetes into account. One does not automatically become an expert in something, because it affects oneself. It is useful to take professional advice, even when it comes to maximization of pleasure due to its objective nature.

EC - GFL:, I am a physician, and I can assure you that medicine is not that advanced. I can tell a patient the probability of something happening for an average patient (who doesn't exist), but I cannot tell that person what she enjoys most.

If a specific objective health outcome is the goal, I can give data, which is often very unclear, with multiple confounding factors.

If subjective pleasure is the goal, I must ask the patient what she enjoys in life. I have no direct measurement of pleasure available at this time. If you mean surveys to ask people to rate their pleasure in different circumstances, there is significant variation between humans.

Cassius Amicus "I am strongly convinced that to all problems there is only one logically correct answer and it can be objectively established."

And as a committed atomist who doesn't believe in a supernatural god, a realm of ideal forms, or a center of the universe from which there is one "correct" perspective, I am strongly convinced that to all human ethical problems (which is I think what we are talking about) there are many possible options, and that the individuals concerned are by nature given the ultimate criteria by which to choose between those options. (And that ultimate criteria is their own feeling of pleasure and pain, by which I mean to include ****all**** their mental and bodily feelings of pleasures and pains.)

GFL: There are many options to choose from, but only one reasonable one.

This is what I like about Epicurus. He does not need beliefs or feelings. All of his teachings can be concluded from empirical observation without additional assumptions.

"Nothing should be believed, except that, which has been tested through direct observation and logical deduction."

He is the father of the modern scientific method.

Cassius Amicus Yes as to the importance of observation and deduction, but the irony that you are not incorporating is that in the end, observation and deduction show us that the only thing that "matters" is feeling!

Cassius Amicus What is the root of saying that something "matters" to us? What is the root of saying that something has "meaning" or "meaningfulness" to us? In the end, those words all add up to "we have a *feeling* about it, or "it causes a *feeling* within us." In the end, all of the innumerable specific feelings we have can be considered to be (if we want to assign words) either pleasurable or painful to us.

EC - Oh, my! Without feelings of pain to warn us of tissue damage, we would not survive very long! Without feelings of pleasure, we have anhedonia, a key symptom of depression, and we would not care about surviving.

Feelings of pain and pleasure are not only essential to guide choices for long term pleasure/happiness- they are essential for survival. It doesn't take much observation of animal life to come to this conclusion!