

Welcome Sam_Qwerty!

Post by "Cassius" of July 30, 2025 at 7:45 PM

[Quote from Sam_Qwerty](#)

Just to make sure I am understanding, many modern writers are saying that according to Epicurus, all real pleasure is the absence of pain, whereas Epicurus also valued the kind of pleasure that is marked by the presence of something. Perhaps pleasant sensations or good company. Am I understanding?

Not exactly.

Epicurus held that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain, so strictly speaking, the absence of one IS the presence of the other, so "absence of pain" DOES mean "pleasure."

The tricky part is that there are those who want to make "absence of pain" sound like Buddhist or Stoic asceticism or detachment. They want to conclude that all that is necessary is to clear one's mind or force away all thoughts of strong emotion, and then as a matter of course you go straight to a feeling of the highest sort of pleasure imaginable. That is why we have [an article here by Elayne](#) arguing against concepts of "fancy pleasure." Every writer is different and getting into people's motives is difficult, but there are many reasons why people want to conclude that Epicurus didn't really advocate "pleasure" as that word is normally understood. And they don't want to see the definition of pleasure expanded, as Epicurus did, they want to see it restricted, to write out the normal active pleasures of life. They want to write out of the philosophy all of the normal active pleasures - the sex, food, sports, joy, delight - that go along with "motion" (and therefore "kinetic" pleasure).

The downside to that for those who want to advocate for [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancients understood it is that if you equate "katastematic pleasure" with something that sounds like a form of mental and bodily nothingness, then no healthy normal common-sense person under about age 60 is going to accept such a position as reasonable. And there are lots of us over 60 who wouldn't accept that either!

So the challenge is to observe that what Diogenes Laertius really said is that Epicurus valued BOTH types of pleasure, both "active" and "stable." Now what "stable" really means is about as up for debate and personal preference as what the active pleasures mean, but what I would argue, and I think Gosling and Taylor and the rest document, is that all pleasure is pleasure, and that there are no "favored by nature" types of activities except as to what translates in an individual person's experience as generating more pleasure than pain.

And of course the key is to remember that there are many types of pleasure, bodily and mental, and that Nature does not give us categories - nature only gives us feelings of pleasure and pain.

What Epicurus identified is that it is logically untenable to argue that "pleasure" as a term means the highest good if there are more than two alternatives. If there is a third category - a middle ground - a neutral state - then you've said that nature gives you THREE options, and you therefore need additional guidance on how to decide between them. If you have to be told by something other than the feeling of pain and pleasure which of the three is the best, then it is THAT KNOWLEDGE of how to choose between them that becomes the most important thing in life to have. That is a large part of Plato's argument against Pleasure in [Philebus](#).

So Epicurus extended the understanding of pleasure to ALL feelings in life - all experience - all awareness, which is not painful. And that's justified by the knowledge that there is no life after death, that life is short, that pleasure is desirable, and that being alive is itself necessary for you to experience pleasure.

That explains the answer to Chrysippus' hand challenge -- the Epicureans held that your hand or any other part of your body, when it is normal and painfree condition - is in a state of pleasure.

And to up the ante on the challenge, when you identify that 100% pleasure is the most pleasure you can have,, then when you say that your hand is pain free you are saying that it is experiencing 100% pleasure - which is the "LIMIT" of pleasure. And that deals with another of Plato's arguments. Plato had argued that if something could always be made better by adding more to it, then that thing has no "limit," and so you can never use such a thing as a goal because you can never reach it.

Identifying pleasure as absence of pain means that there IS a limit to pleasure, and that limit is achieved when all pain is gone, and so the challenge made by Plato that pleasure has no limit is overcome.

Yes all of this is subtle, and takes attention and reasoning to figure out. But Epicurus was a philosopher battling Platonists and others who held that pleasure cannot be the goal of life. He was not fighting people who argued that the highest pleasure was to remove all active pleasure from your life, minimize your desires and your footprint to the slightest amount possible, and then clear your mind and detach yourself from reality. The Romans and Greeks would never have made such an absurdity popular, but today there is a large constituency for that point of view and they like nothing more than arguing that Epicurus is one of them.