

Practical Daily Pleasure-- Creating Pleasurable Habits

Post by "Cassius" of July 5, 2019 at 6:58 PM

From Elayne:

This is a thread to discuss practical application of EP in the small, daily habits of our lives. It is easier to realize we are making decisions when it comes to the big things like education, career/ job choices, whether to marry or have children, where to live, etc. But most of our days are spent doing habitual actions. Neurologically, our brains create habits to conserve effort-- if we had to think about every single action all day long, we would have decision fatigue before lunch and maybe even before breakfast.

If you have been practicing EP for a long time, you have probably already developed daily habits that are pleasurable. However, if you are newer, it is worth your time to examine what you do habitually during a typical day and try out new habits if your old ones are not pleasurable. And even if you have been practicing for a long time, sometimes your old pleasures may grow stale and you will want to change them rather than stick with a habit.

Typical habits include things like sleeping times/ places, diet, amount/ type and timing of physical movement, activities that engage your senses, hobbies, friendships and social activities you participate in as a routine (such as, for me, Thursday night Chorus practice). I would also include how you arrange your daily surroundings-- your home and outdoor settings, and even your clothes. These are all potential avenues for pleasure, and none of them are trivial-- because we have no absolute scale to rate pleasures by importance and triviality. Those are labels people put on your pleasures to try and influence you.

How we make decisions about these small daily habits is the exact same process as for all decisions: we ask ourselves "Every desire must be confronted by this question: What will happen to me if the object of my desire is accomplished, and what if it is not?" (VS 71).

In addition, because our culture inundates us with Stoicism, Platonism, and other idealisms, maybe it will help beginners to ask themselves a few more questions. If you skip this part, you are at risk of inserting these ideologies into your daily schedule and missing out on your pleasure.

1) Is there any other goal I am inadvertently putting above pleasure, such as minimalism, social utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number), etc? If this is the case, remind yourself that the universe is material. There is no supernatural world, and you will live only until

death. This means there are no absolute standards of virtue, and there is no ideal or "perfect" world to achieve. Remember that we include our subjective feelings of pain and pleasure as valid information about reality, and that pleasure is our goal. There are times when having less stuff will increase your pleasure, and times when having more stuff will do it. Use pleasure as your guide rather than an arbitrary concept someone else is giving you. You can feel your pleasure directly.

2) Are you aiming for pleasure or trying to avoid pain? Although increasing pleasure in life does mean decreasing pain, because it is an either-or situation, practically speaking you will get more pleasure by aiming at it. Just thinking of pleasure brings more pleasure. It is necessary to keep pain in mind if you are continuously trying to avoid it, and this is a pain you don't need to have. I like the pothole/ motorcycle metaphor. If a biker gazes at potholes, they will often drive right into them. Gazing at the pothole-free road is a more successful strategy. Sometimes your road of pleasure has a pothole you have to go through to get to the good part-- if so, rather than stopping cold to avoid the scary pothole, focus on your pleasure goal and get right on through the pothole. Avoidance as your primary strategy can lead to a fearful, constricted life.

3) Are you trying to limit/"balance" your pleasure with anything else, out of fear that you can have "too much pleasure"? If so, the good news is that there is no such thing as too much pleasure. If it is "too much", that means it is not pleasure at all but pain! Some specific activities that bring pleasure also bring more pain than pleasure. In that case, find a way to modify the activity so it is more pleasurable/ less painful, or choose a different activity entirely. Stopping eating when you are full, for example, is maximizing your pleasure, not limiting it. A common error is thinking you need to "balance" your own pleasure with the pleasure of others. But an Epicurean knows that the pleasure of our loved ones and even sometimes the pleasure of strangers is not separate from our own pleasure-- we are entangled closely with friends and often have empathy for strangers. This is a feeling process, more than a cognitive assessment. There will be times when you have an opponent, someone who directly presents a threat to your pleasure-- and in these cases, it certainly won't make you enjoy life more to please them.

4) If you are developing habits that you hope will lead to future pleasures, ask yourself if your goal is concrete or idealistic. An idealistic, imaginary goal is one that can't actually be achieved, like "perfect health" or "perfect freedom"-- with an imaginary goal you will never be satisfied. For concrete goals, is it likely you can achieve the result you desire? Can you do anything to make your actions towards the goal pleasurable, so that even if you don't "get there", you will still enjoy the process? Is the end goal something you really want, or is it someone else's idealistic goal?

Once you have chosen your new daily habits, be sure to savor the pleasures of each activity. That way you will get the most pleasure out of them, and you can also create memories to rely on for later pleasures.

At least sometimes, at the end of the day, look back and evaluate how pleasurable your activities were. Think about changing them if your experiments were not enjoyable.

In practice, here is what this could look like (your day will likely be different):

I have experimented with waking at different times, and I prefer an early morning, around 5:30-6 am. I can wake then without an alarm-- I am a "lark". So I try to go to bed in time to make my mornings enjoyable.

I enjoy coffee, only 1-2 cups a morning-- very much. I have learned to roast my own coffee, in my garage, and I make myself a delicious cup every morning using my Chemex/ pour-over with fresh ground coffee. This is an easy habit. I sit and savor my delicious coffee-- weather permitting-- on my deck under the trees. I take my time to wake up fully, think about things, read, and sometimes do some writing, before starting work.

After coffee, I exercise. I have experimented with different types of physical exercise, and the two things I like the most are hiking and dancing around free-style. I mix in free weights with the dancing around-- I have an Olympic bar in my garage with plates-- and I have a yoga swing with handles which functions like a trx. I have taken time to make playlists of my favorite exercise music. I go hiking as many times a week as I have time, depending on work and the weather. During the day, if I am sitting a lot, I set my phone alarm for every 20-30 minutes and jump up to do some dancing around for a few minutes.

I am in a more pleasant mood if I get outdoors often, so I make a habit of daily walks even if not hiking. At night, I go out and look at the stars if it is clear.

I love singing, so I belong to a women's Chorus-- this mixes the pleasures of singing in with the pleasures of friendship! I sing in the shower, in the kitchen... sometimes on the hiking trail.

I enjoy bright colors, so I have taken time to decorate my condo in my favorite colors--turquoise, bright orange, green, pink. I found a condo which was more affordable than the apartments locally, and I bought it mainly for the deck with a view of the mountains and trees. The virtue of the lower cost living is not in minimalism or frugality-- it is in the absence of worry that I won't be able to pay my mortgage and in the daily enjoyment.

I love listening to music, so I have good quality headphones. A Sunday afternoon of reading a well-written book while sipping spiced hot tea and listening to Chopin is sublime, for me.

I enjoy reading for pleasure, so I make sure to always have a queue of things I want to read, and I have a habit of reading in the evenings.

I invite family and friends over some evenings, and I enjoy cooking for them and watching them smile when they taste my cooking.

What do your daily pleasures look like?