

# Discussion of Article: "On Pleasure, Pain and Happiness"

Post by "Cassius" of July 12, 2019 at 10:01 PM

I agree with the vast majority of the article. Here are my initial comments which I will try to organize according to Elayne's sections. I have included reference to Elayne's sections in the underlined headings. Then my comments on each section follow, in italics.

1. The feelings are only two, pleasure and pain—there is no true third state such as neutral, except after death.
  1. *Agreed, although after death is probably not a third state, it is non-existence.*
2. The cup analogy is not to be taken literally.
  1. *Agreed*
3. At any given moment we could see a single lifelong movie of this cup.
  1. *Agreed*
4. Only two feelings / no neutral state
  1. *Yes there are only two feelings, and there are no neutral feelings. But this does not mean that there is a feeling about everything that comes to our attention. Something can come to our attention without eliciting any responsive "feeling" whatsoever. Feelings serve as the only guide which Nature gave us to determine what to choose and what to avoid, but that does not mean that Nature gave us an indicator to choose or avoid in response to every experience that comes our way.*
  2. *What is the significance of Epicurus stressing that there are only two feelings?*
    1. *To start, Epicurus probably considered that there is no such thing as "pleasure" in the abstract. In reality, there are only individual experiences perceived by individual living things as pleasurable. The concept of "pleasure" is a model which suffers from the same difficulties which are discussed later in this article as a hazard of model-making.*
    2. *Why articulate "pleasure" as a concept as the goal without constantly listing individual pleasures? Probably because of the logical necessity to be able to talk about the issue, and symbolize pleasures in a single word, and*
    3. *to divide feeling up into the two concepts of pleasure and pain, so as to deal with the logical arguments (such as presented by Plato in [Philebus](#)) that if there were neutral or mixed feelings, it would be necessary for there to be an arbiter to which we would have to look to separate out and rank the choices by some standard other than pleasure or pain. If we admit there is such a need for such an arbiter, then we are impelled toward the conclusion that knowledge of this arbiter is something more important than either pleasure or pain, and this would remove pleasure from its role as the highest good.*

5. Because there is no neutral, removing all pain in life is only possible with maximal pleasure.
  1. *Once it is accepted (IF it is accepted) that there are only two feelings, then this becomes true by definition. Whether someone understands the implications of this definition, however, is entirely different.*
  2. *I agree with Elayne that positing "neutrality" as a goal is contrary to experience; I would also say it is absurd.*
  3. *However the point which we will need to deal is that the majority of commentators read Epicurus as implying (or stating explicitly) that this condition of "absence of pain" is (meaning is equivalent too) "the highest pleasure." The presumption which is planted is that somehow "absence of pain" results in a state of exaltation which is higher and/or more intense and/or more valuable in some way than any normal pleasures of music, food, friends, sex, dance, or any other standard mental or bodily pleasure that one can name. No one can advance any explanation of this pleasure that normal people find satisfactory, but that does not stop them from doing it. The result is Stoicism on steroids.*
6. The extent of pleasure can be maximized by making sure to attend to all parts of one's body, including the brain.
  1. *I think this section is well stated and at least at this time I have nothing to add.*
7. Happiness is itself a pleasurable feeling, most easily described as the condition of a person who has maximized pleasure in all areas of life.
  1. *I would say that happiness is a word that we use to describe a mental experience of pleasures predominating over pains. I do not think I would say that happiness requires maximized pleasures in all areas of life. I think Epicurus described himself as happy on the last day of his life, even though he was suffering excruciating physical pain. From this perspective "happiness" is a concept rather than a particular pleasurable experience or set of pleasurable experience. I would be cautious about considering "happiness" to be an experience which is separate from some combination of otherwise ordinary mental pleasurable feeling/experiences. The further "happiness" is detached from specific pleasurable feelings, the easier it is to slip in to the definition other alleged requirements, such as wisdom or virtue or money or whatever, which other philosophers assert is required to constitute a happy man.*
  2. *As to variation, I believe Epicurus was not saying that variation is not desirable. Living another to experience more pleasures may simply be variation, but it is desirable in and of itself. I believe the references to variation are again an artefact of responding to Platonic logical objections. Epicurus was probably responding to the argument that pleasure cannot be "the good" because it allegedly has no limit by responding that pleasure does have a limit, when the allegorical vessel is full. This provides a counterargument to the logical argument of Plato, but it does not in itself diminish the desirability of variation.*
  3. *By not commenting on other aspects of this section I am not implying that I disagree with them; in general I agree with everything I read that I am not*

*specifically commenting on.*

8. The capacity for pain is a valuable warning system and should not be disabled except in unusual conditions, but the experience of pain is to be avoided unless it is chosen for the sake of greater pleasure/ lesser pain over the lifespan.
  1. *I totally agree with this section.*
9. Humans have many shared responses of pain or pleasure to specific experiences, and they also have individual variations.
  1. *I totally agree*
10. The standard of pleasure in one's life must be one's own subjective feelings, not a generic advice.
  1. *I totally agree, even though I think Elayne thinks I disagree here. I will try to explain that in connection with my "Epicurean Worksheet." The major point comes down in my mind to the issue of turning feelings into abstract numbers. I agree that that is impossible. However I think that conditioning in the modern world has led most people to think that it is valid to rank feelings on some kind of "objective" or "absolute" scale. They have bought into this ranking system, even if they do not appreciate the implications of it. I think that this is a problem similar to the Platonic attacks on pleasure. Epicurus likely thought they were ridiculous, but he was surrounded by philosophy students in Athens who had heard the arguments and likely presumed them to be correct. I believe that is why he came up with the "limits of pleasure" argument in the first place, to show how the Platonic attacks could be defeated on logical grounds. Likewise I think it is necessary for some people to hear a response to attacks on feelings that defends feelings on at least somewhat "logical" terms, even though feelings cannot be reduced to logical representations (numbers). The goal of the Epicurean worksheet (which it may well not reach) is to illustrate the logical absurdity which would occur if "minimal pain" were actually adopted as the explicit goal of life.)*
11. There are many pitfalls to avoid if one desires a happy, pleasure-filled life, such as a false belief in a neutral state, practices which attempt to disable the normal capacity to feel pleasure and pain, and failure to consider the long-term pains and pleasures resulting from actions.
  1. *The part I would comment on again here is the "neutrality" part. It now occurs to me that Elayne may have more experience with eastern viewpoints than I do, and that she may be right to consider that some people really do aim at neutrality, a viewpoint I find so absurd as to not take it seriously. She may be right to aim more fire at neutrality. My difference in emphasis is that I do not believe the "conventional academic epicureans" are aiming at neutrality. I believe they are aiming at asceticism / pain / obedience / regimentation as a control mechanism over other people who, for whatever reason, they deem need to be controlled.*
12. In discussing pain and pleasure, Epicureans stick to real life situations, not hypothetical philosophical puzzles.
  1. *I agree with all of this!*

13. "Ok, that's the last of it. The differences between my perspective and Cassius, as I understand it, are:"

1. "Cassius does not think absence of pain in a living person is synonymous with fullness of pleasure. IMO this would require a third state, neutral, which I do not believe actually exists."

1. *I do not consider this to be an accurate statement of my position. From my viewpoint, my position is ""absence of pain" as a term is not \*\*\*sufficient\*\*\* to describe any condition worthy of being called "fullness of pleasure. In my viewpoint, this terminology has been intentionally adopted by opponents of pleasure to imply that pleasure, or fullness of pleasure, is not an "experience." It is my view that "absence of pain" was used by Epicurus as a reference to quantity, and under the system of having only two feelings, the presence of one is by definition the absence of the other. So from the perspective of quantity, yes absence of pain is sufficient to equate to fullness of pleasure. But quantity is only one aspect of the experience of pleasure, and a full definition would require much more detail to describe the full experience. Added to that is the observation that I think Elayne makes here too, that it is essentially impossible to describe a feeling via concepts / words. We can make the effort and attempt it, but no map of the real world is the equivalent of the real world itself.*

2. Cassius proposes that the cup itself can be enlarged to admit more pleasures. I would take the position I understand meant by Epicurus saying that once the cup is full, it only admits variations.

1. *I believe the cup analogy was developed to illustrate the limit of pleasure, which is itself a logical device intended to explain how pleasure can have a limit. That limit is that the human experience, at any one moment, or over a lifetime, can have only a limited quantity of experiences.*

2. *As referenced above I believe that Epicurus held variation to be desirable in itself, because that is just another word for additional pleasure. The point in this context is not that more pleasure is not desirable, but that our human makeup only allows us to experience so much of it, and no more, within our living experience.*

3. *As to the question of whether the cup can be enlarged, that is a reference my interpretation of the argument by Okeefe and others that the real goal of Epicurus was moderate asceticism, and my argument that if we indeed set the focus of life as "minimizing pain" then the logical course to achieve that would be (1) suicide, and (2) failing suicide, living in a cave as a hermit on bread and water. What I am saying about a variable size cup is that we as humans do have some control over the figurative "size of the vessel" of our lives. We can commit suicide at age 20, which results in a figuratively smaller vessel than someone who lives to age 40. We can choose to live in a dark cave on bread and water staring into a flame, and in my view that does result in a figuratively smaller vessel of experiences than that of a vessel*

*representing the life of a world adventurer of the same age. It is probably also valid to consider that the size of the allegorical vessel differs based on the mental and physical capacities or disabilities of the person involved. The word "human" is an abstraction - there are only individual living people. There is no allegorical "human vessel" which is the same for all individuals. This is another limitation of the use of conceptual analogies which we have to keep in mind. In discussing an allegorical "vessel of life" that vessel is not going to be of the same type for every individual, and I think it is useful also to consider that the vessel of our total experiences can enlarge or diminish based on our life choices. Once again, I think the limit of pleasure argument and the limit of pleasure issue was introduced for the limited purpose of dealing with pesky academic logical traps, and was never intended (nor could it serve) as a completely accurate summary of all aspects of pleasure. The full vessel analogy supplies us with a logical response to those who argue that the highest goal of life must have a defined "limit." The vessel analogy does not even begin to communicate the nature of the individual pleasurable and painful experiences which it must contain in order to be useful.*