

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

Post by "Cassius" of July 17, 2019 at 6:08 PM

This task could consume all our attention so we have to make a decisions on how far to go and how not to go.

Also: I am not sure how much reading Elli has put into [Philebus](#), so she may know more about this than I do, but I am going to try to absorb at least the commentary on [Philebus](#) that starts the standard English translation, by Benjamin Jowett. I copied the Gutenberg version and [placed it here](#).

Already I see this point below ,which I think is related to what we have been discussing as the target which PD3 and "absence of pain" are intended to address. But this observation from Jowett lends more specificity.

The point made here is that when we see the ancient Greeks discussing the issue of "infinite" or "something which has no limit," we should be thinking not wholly in terms of extent, but in terms of "definiteness." If Jowett is correct, Plato's problem with pleasure being infinite is not so much (or not only) that it can never be quenched in extent, but that it is INDEFINITE; UNTHINKABLE; UNKNOWABLE; OF WHICH NOTHING CAN BE AFFIRMED; CHAOTIC;..... The very act of placing Pleasure in the category of those things of which there are lesser or greater amounts paints it with all sorts of negative implications which could not possibly be consistent with the ultimate good of life.

That would mean that in asserting that pleasure has a limit (the full extent of the individual's experience) then Epicurus is saying that pleasure as a goal is "definite," "thinkable," "knowable," "capable of being affirmed," "ordered," etc.

This is fully consistent, but a deeper slant, with the idea that the vessel can be filled in quantity. This would go further and affirm that pleasure is something that is not only attainable, but definite enough to be understood, at least in terms of it serving as the goal / guide of life.

## Quote

The first of Plato's categories or elements is the infinite. This is the negative of measure or limit; the unthinkable, the unknowable; of which nothing can be affirmed; the mixture or chaos which preceded distinct kinds in the creation of the world; the first vague impression of sense; the more or less which refuses to be reduced to rule, having certain affinities with evil, with pleasure, with ignorance, and which in the scale

of being is farthest removed from the beautiful and good. To a Greek of the age of Plato, the idea of an infinite mind would have been an absurdity. He would have insisted that 'the good is of the nature of the finite,' and that the infinite is a mere negative, which is on the level of sensation, and not of thought. He was aware that there was a distinction between the infinitely great and the infinitely small, but he would have equally denied the claim of either to true existence. Of that positive infinity, or infinite reality, which we attribute to God, he had no conception.

**The Greek conception of the infinite would be more truly described, in our way of speaking, as the indefinite.** To us, the notion of infinity is subsequent rather than prior to the finite, expressing not absolute vacancy or negation, but only the removal of limit or restraint, which we suppose to exist not before but after we have already set bounds to thought and matter, and divided them after their kinds. From different points of view, either the finite or infinite may be looked upon respectively both as positive and negative (compare 'Omnis determinatio est negatio') and the conception of the one determines that of the other. The Greeks and the moderns seem to be nearly at the opposite poles in their manner of regarding them. And both are surprised when they make the discovery, as Plato has done in the Sophist, how large an element negation forms in the framework of their thoughts.

Jowett raises lots of issues and problems contained in [Philebus](#) which I don't begin to understand, and I haven't even read through his commentary once. But all this fits in the category that I would loosely refer to as "Why is Ataraxia/Aponia Important?" / "Why are Limits Important?" / "Why Talk in Terms of Absence of Pain Rather than Positive Pleasures?" / "Why PD3 and Related Comments Do Not Make Epicurus an Ascetic" /

It also helps fit PD3 and PD4 in the same category of "antidotes" such as PD1 and PD2 which help us understand the context of enemies Epicurus was facing:

(1) Why would one be concerned about false doctrines of divinity unless false priests were spreading mischief? And what is the doctrine that serves as the antidote to all such allegations? (The true nature of divinity as perfection and self-sufficient)

(2) Why would one be concerned about what happens after death unless false priests were spreading mischief about a heaven and hell? And what is the doctrine that serves as the antidote to all such allegations? Death is the end of sensation and all evil must come through sensation.

(3) Why would one be concerned about whether pleasure has a "limit," or about defining pleasure as "absence of pain," unless false philosophers were spreading mischief that (1) pleasure is unlimited and therefore indefinite and insatiable and not competent to be the highest good, and (2) that pleasures can be divided up and ranked and categorized so that we

can through reason alone decide which are worthy of choice? And what is the antidote to all such allegations? That the feeling of pleasure has a definite end-point which we can understand (A. that we can fill our experience with pleasure, after which we have no further need of MORE pleasure, and B. that there is a unity of pleasure in that all pleasure is pleasing, so we can choose any activities (and not just those deemed "worthy," which to us seem pleasurable as a way to fill up our vessel / expel all pain.)