

More on "Simple Pleasures"

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2018 at 8:33 PM

[Cassius AmicusGroup Admin](#) Ross if you agree that Pleasure is the only thing desirable in and of itself, and that the only reason for anything to be choiceworthy (including friendship, wisdom, prudence or any other "virtue") is because of the pleasure that is brought from it (including the avoidance of unnecessary pain), then we are agreed on the major point of discussion.

As to the minor point that you believe you should limit yourself only to "modest pleasures" I think you are misreading Epicurus and limiting your life unnecessarily. I believe that advocacy of that position in a group devoted to promoting the study of Epicurean philosophy should never go unchallenged due to the error it would cause others to follow if accepted. Having made that point again, however, I move on and wish you well.

The point of a discussion group is to discuss, and we've done that in this thread, so there are certainly no hard feelings or ill wishes on my side of this conversation.[1](#)

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[Ross Ragsdale](#) I just didn't want to flood the feed with more comments. If that's fine I'm game [1f642.png](#) Image not found or type unknown

I don't feel we're preaching self-denial or "monkish" virtues in advocating what is described in the letter to menoeceus, which is what I believe you fear the most. We still enjoy ourselves, but we use prudence to determine which pleasures are worth our time and which pains are worth enduring.

Let's take sex and exercise as examples. Sex for the most part is pleasurable. Sex with a condom is less pleasurable (although some may disagree, I'd wonder if they were using the condom correctly if they actually thought that the physical sensation felt more pleasurable). If a college student hooks up with someone and they aren't sure whether or not the other person has an sti, or they aren't sure that the other person uses birth control, the sage or wise man would use contraception even though it's less pleasurable at the moment, it's better to use one to avoid future pains such as unplanned pregnancies or stis. We pick the less pleasurable activity to avoid pain. Some may just avoid sex altogether if they're that worried about the other participant's/s' health.

Now for exercise—when you're out of shape it hurts to exercise. Literally mostly painful sensations (my necessary evil is 30 min of cardio most days). Cardio however, is one of the best ways to preserve and promote one's physical health. The painful sensations at the moment in the end lead to a more pleasant state of being and sensation, assuming that the person in question is using an adequate understanding of anatomy and mechanics. It results in more pleasure because they're physically healthier, better blood pressure, less preventable diseases, etc. If this state isn't pleasurable, then it at least a consistent way to avoid pain.

I don't see how that's a misreading, and I don't see how that's a minor point? It is a very important distinction to make. The only time a pleasure would not be considered choice worthy is if it lead to a greater pain (e.g. refraining from contraception or drinking in excess to the point of nausea/vomiting, or a bad hangover the next day). Could you please point me to any of the letters or works written by Epicurus that disagree with this analysis?

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Cassius Amicus Ross I have absolutely no problem with what you wrote in this last paragraph, and I certainly have no problem with the letter to Menoecus. I am only replying to your specific statement earlier: "Because of the situation in which we find ourselves, heaven filled with only stars rather than involved gods, our best chance of living the good life, a life of modest pleasure and ataraxia, we need friendship and practical wisdom, aka. prudence."

You very specifically stated that "the good life" is "a life of modest pleasure and ataraxia." A statement defining the good life must always be scrutinized because all else follows from what one defines as the ultimate good. And the ultimate good is not "modest pleasure" but "pleasure." I gather that you think this is an unimportant distinction, and I agree with you that Epicurus tells people to choose their pleasures carefully. But his philosophy is not built on choosing "modest pleasures" as the definition of the goal, because that is not the goal. Epicurus says so specifically in the letter to Menoecus ("Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it. ... To habituate one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune.")

Epicurus makes the same point with blinding clarity in [VS63](#): "There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance." There is simply no way to square this statement with a rule to "only pursue modest pleasures" - but there is no contradiction when one realizes that when "pleasure" is the goal, then whether the particular pleasure to pursue is modest or luxurious is

going to be determined under the circumstances then and there existing to the person. When appropriate we enjoy "simple" pleasures, but when appropriate we enjoy luxury, just as Epicurus says (in why we are in a better position to enjoy luxury when it is available.)

I think some people see exactly what I am saying without further explanation, but some people take exception to this as if I am suggesting that simplicity is bad, or that pursuing luxury is good. I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is that one of the prime, continuing, tempting, and most common arguments against Epicurean philosophy is suggesting that there is something besides PLEASURE that is the goal of life. The people who advocate "virtue" as the goal frequently begin by suggesting that certain types of pleasure are more to be preferred than others because they are more worthy, or more noble, or more virtuous, or more *something.* And the most frequently suggested substitute for "pleasure" is "simple pleasures" or "modest pleasures."

But there is nothing in Epicurean philosophy that says a "simple pleasure" is more to be preferred than any other kind of pleasure except for ONE factor: That factor is that in many cases (but not all), more complex pleasures entail greater pain in acquisition or in result than the pleasure is worth. That is why we sometimes choose pain, or sometimes defer an immediate pleasure. Since pleasure and pain are inverse, the problem (and the ONLY problem) with complex pleasures is that they frequently cancel out the pleasure they bring (or worse) due to the pain they bring. The point here is that the choice is still measured in NET pleasure/pain, not in whether the activity is "simple" or "complex."

Modifiers on the word "Pleasure" as the goal of life were not generally used as far as I know by Epicurus or Lucretius, The reason modifiers were not used is clear: Epicurean philosophy is ultimately practical and the furthest thing from idealism. In an atomist universe with human free will it is impossible to say that a certain course of conduct is ALWAYS going to lead to such and such a conclusion. We cannot even say that Metrodorus MUST be either alive or dead tomorrow. The only thing we can say as a rule about our choices is that we should seek pleasure and avoid pain. Often simple pleasures are the better choice, and as Epicurus said it is better to acclimate oneself to living within one's means so as to be more likely to be independent. But on other days luxuries are easily within reach, and it is natural and proper to enjoy them when we can do so without undue cost, again just as Epicurus said, especially since we have no concern about not having those luxuries tomorrow.

That's why defining the goal of life to be "modest pleasure" is as much an error as defining the goal of life as "immediate pleasure" or "luxurious pleasure" or "friendship" or "music" or "art" or any other single "type" of pleasure. "There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance."