

# Hypotheticals: Would An Epicurean Hook Himself Up To An "Experience Machine" or a "Pleasure Machine"?

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2020 at 9:40 AM

Thank you Eugenios! I share your enthusiasm to discuss this, especially given what you wrote here:

## [Quote from Eugenios](#)

The Experience Machine is merely a simulation of the universe that doesn't provide "real" pleasure or pain but merely the illusion of pleasure.

LOL please take this constructively but my belief is that this is exactly the wrong approach. I do not find anything in Epicurus which would indicate that he considered there to be categories of "true pleasure" and "false pleasure," and in fact I believe that by following this path you will fall directly into the pitfall by which Plato trapped [Philebus](#) into abandoning our goddess of choice!



You may well have read [Philebus](#) much more closely than have I, so please correct me if I am wrong, but as I understand Plato's argument, Plato led [Philebus](#) into agreeing to divide pleasures into pure and impure, and therein is the peril. Check this exchange from [Philebus](#):

## Quote

SOCRATES: These, in turn, then, I will now endeavour to indicate; for with the maintainers of the opinion that all pleasures are a cessation of pain, I do not agree, but, as I was saying, I use them as witnesses, **that there are pleasures which seem only and are not**, and there are others again which have great power and appear in many forms, yet are intermingled with pains, and are partly alleviations of agony and distress, both of body and mind.

PROTARCHUS: Then what pleasures, Socrates, should we be right in conceiving to be **true?**

SOCRATES: **True pleasures** are those which are given by beauty of colour and form, and most of those which arise from smells; those of sound, again, and in general those of which the want is painless and unconscious, and of which the fruition is palpable to sense and pleasant and unalloyed with pain.

PROTARCHUS: Once more, Socrates, I must ask what you mean.

SOCRATES: My meaning is certainly not obvious, and I will endeavour to be plainer. I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but, says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures which are formed out of them by turning-lathes and rulers and measurers of angles; for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are **eternally and absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures**, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colours which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures; now do you understand my meaning?

PROTARCHUS: I am trying to understand, Socrates, and I hope that you will try to make your meaning clearer.

SOCRATES: When sounds are smooth and clear, and have a single pure tone, then I mean to say that they are not relatively but **absolutely beautiful, and have natural pleasures** associated with them.

PROTARCHUS: Yes, **there are such pleasures**.

SOCRATES: The pleasures of smell are of a less ethereal sort, but they have no necessary admixture of pain; and all pleasures, however and wherever experienced, which are unattended by pains, I assign to an analogous class. **Here then are two kinds of pleasures**.

....

*SOCRATES: And now, having fairly separated the pure pleasures and those which may be rightly termed impure, let us further add to our description of them, that the pleasures which are in excess have no measure, but that those which are not in excess have measure; the great, the excessive, whether more or less frequent, we shall be right in referring to the class of the infinite, and of the more and less, which pours through body and soul alike; and the others we shall refer to the class which has measure.*

*PROTARCHUS: Quite right, Socrates.*

*SOCRATES: Still there is something more to be considered about pleasures.*

*PROTARCHUS: What is it?*

*SOCRATES: When you speak of **purity** and clearness, or of excess, abundance, greatness and sufficiency, in what relation do these terms stand to truth?*

*PROTARCHUS: Why do you ask, Socrates?*

*SOCRATES: Because, Protarchus, I should wish to test pleasure and knowledge in every possible way, in order that if there be a **pure and impure element** in either of them, I may present the pure element for judgment, and then they will be more easily judged of by you and by me and by all of us.*

*PROTARCHUS: Most true.*

*SOCRATES: Let us investigate all the pure kinds; first selecting for consideration a single instance.*

*PROTARCHUS: What instance shall we select?*

*SOCRATES: Suppose that we first of all take whiteness.*

*PROTARCHUS: Very good.*

*SOCRATES: **How can there be purity in whiteness, and what purity? Is that purest which is greatest or most in quantity, or that which is most unadulterated and freest from any admixture of other colours?***

*PROTARCHUS: Clearly that which is most unadulterated.*

*SOCRATES: True, Protarchus; **and so the purest white, and not the greatest or largest in quantity, is to be deemed truest and most beautiful?***

*PROTARCHUS: Right.*

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Once you agree that some pleasures are pure and some are impure (or in your terms "true" or "false," or in Stoic terms such as noble and ignoble, or virtuous and debased, or good and evil or righteous or unrighteous) you are then impelled to recognize that the ability to judge between pure and impure (or true and false) is critically important.

I won't go into the details of the rest of Plato's argument but once you accept that distinction, you are then compelled eventually to recognize that the WISDOM to know the difference is essential to the best life, and must be added to pleasure, and then you are far down the rabbit trail to having to admit that Wisdom is therefore the ultimate good.

As I understand it Epicurus admitted only one measure of "pure and impure" pleasure - and that is PLEASURE UNMIXED WITH ANY PAIN.

That is why the focus on "absence of pain" in Epicurus! Not because "absence of pain" is something in itself, but because PLEASURE UNMIXED WITH PAIN is the definition of the best life possible.

Look at Socrates/Plato's last comment: He is setting up a concept of "**pure and impure**" against "**largest in quantity.**" And he is implying "pure and impure" is measured against some standard of purity that is outside of pleasure itself. And remember that "The Limit of Quantity of Pleasure" is exactly what Epicurus addresses in PD3! ("3. **The limit of quantity** in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.")

Let me stop at this point and get your reaction to this, and I hope others will comment too!

Edit: I expanded the quote from [Philebus](#) so as to start with the reference to "**that there are pleasures which seem only and are not,**" which is much on point with Eugenios' comment.